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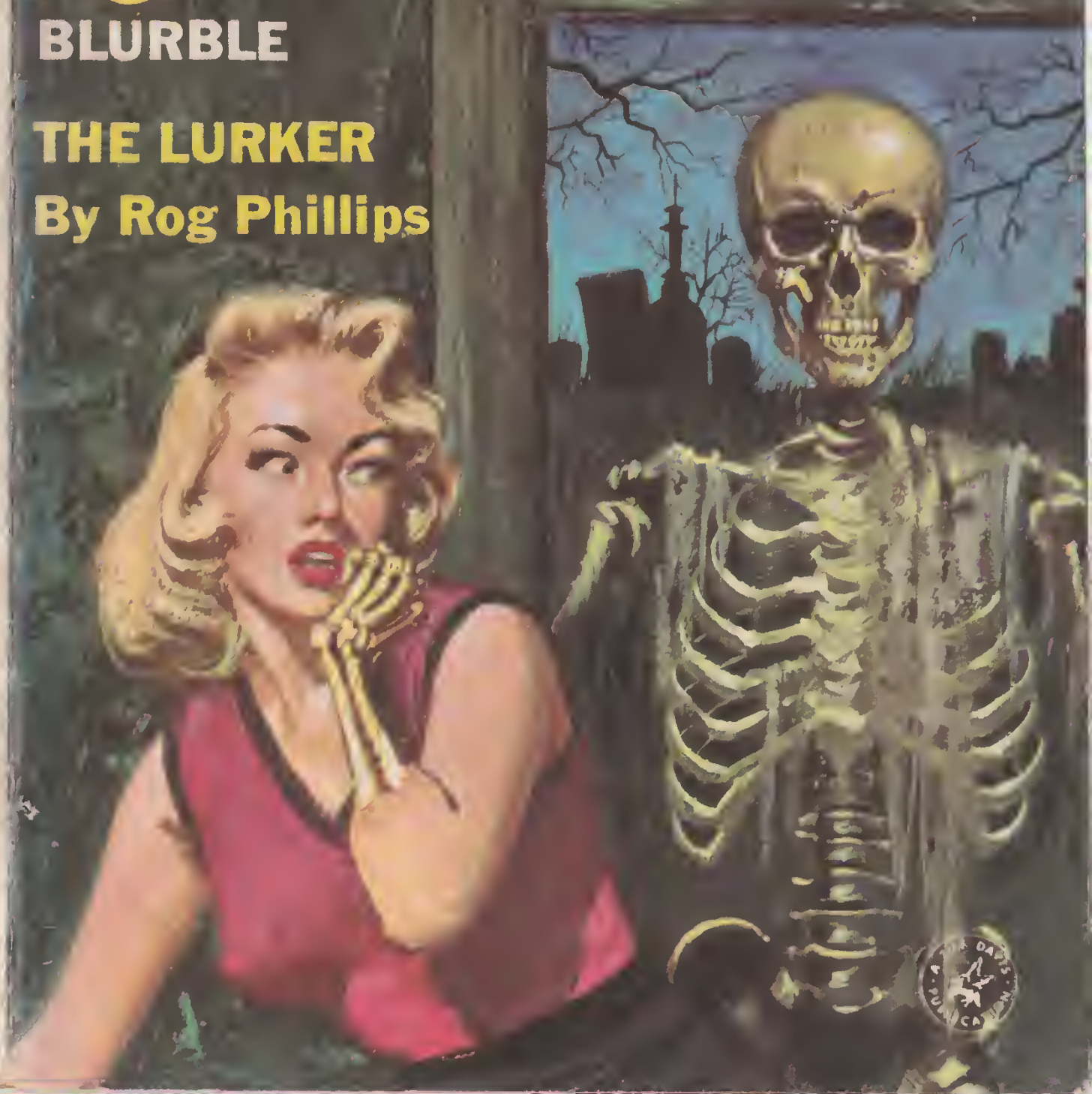
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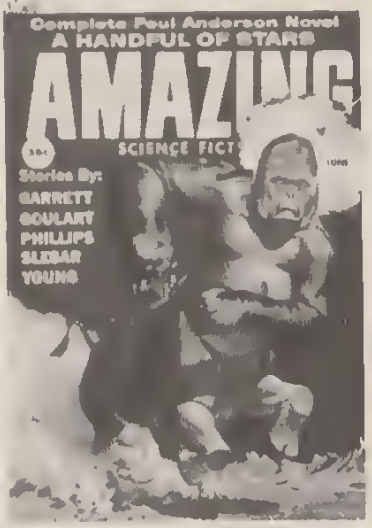
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fantastic

JUNE 1959

Volume 8 Number 6

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Editorial

AFTER reading a report made by a lecturer at a recent meeting of the American Physical Society, we are preparing a new play for Broadway to be titled "Pentagrams in the Pentagon."

For, believe it or not, the gentleman implied that demons have their place in the scientific method! Perhaps his remarks will have some soothing effect on the eternal squabble between devotees of fantasy and sf.

The speaker was Jerome Rothstein, a top scientific executive in a Massachusetts engineering research firm. And he said that a special breed of demon could be helpful to theoretical physicists. Defining a demon as a "hypothetical being not constrained by one of the fundamental physical laws," Rothstein said this kind of "demonology" could help scientists take a fresh look at complex problems—especially such vast frontier realms of time, faster-than-light speeds, communications theory.

Two such demons are already recognized by science. One is Maxwell's demon, named for the 19th century British physicist. This demon would be able to perform the supposedly impossible task of sorting hot gas molecules from cold ones without affecting the whole system in any way. Laplace's demon, named for the 19th century French astronomer, impossibly knows the exact position and speed of every particle in the universe—and is thus able to know all past, present and future events. But such knowledge is possible only if the entire universe were at absolute zero—something also thought impossible.

(Continued on page 84)

They struggled, the girls, through the Gate of Life and Death, and from Limbo came the shrieks of the damned

GIVE ME MY BODY!

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

THE room was dim and quiet. What light there was, seeped in around drawn shades and there were faint sounds of traffic from the street twenty floors below.

The girl who lay on Doctor John Logan's couch was under hypnosis. She was rather pretty, lying there relaxed with her eyes closed and a look of empty peace on her face. At intervals, her mouth tightened, a constriction appeared on the surface of her smooth throat, and the hands lying lax on her abdomen tightened into fists.

But she was under deep hypnosis and there was little physical reaction.

Doctor John Logan sat in an easy chair beside the couch with a pad and pencil in his hands. He looked rather young for the success his Park Avenue address and luxuriously furnished suite indicated. He was a thin, handsome man with deep brown eyes and a sensitive mouth—impressive looking—but if anyone had read the notes on his pad in search of a clue to deep psychiatric truths, they would have been disappointed. His notes read: *Rachel March — 25 — female caucasian — possessions? — dual personality? — off her rocker but good.* And below the notes were some doodles of little girls in pig-tails marching over the pad.

Across the room, in a starched white uniform, stood a second girl. She waited beside a white cart on which lay a primed hypodermic needle on a sterile white



Dinah screamed out in rage and terror as Dane thrust her toward the fire.

cloth. She looked alert, efficient, and well able to use the needle.

Doctor John Logan had been sitting silent for several minutes. Now he raised a finger and the starched nurse came forward and leaned closer. There was—in addition to her subtle perfume—the even more subtle and heady aroma of vital womanhood which would have been definitely enjoyable to Doctor Logan if he hadn't had more important things on his mind.

He spoke in a whisper. "She's as deep as I dare go, now. I'm going to start questioning her. If it doesn't work, I'll bring her out quick and you be ready with that hypo. And don't get far away. You may have to help me hold her down."

The nurse stepped back a couple of paces and waited.

Logan waited, too; for a brief time during which he debated as to whether or not he was doing the right thing. Perhaps he should have called in consultation. He'd considered that and decided against it, not because he had any great confidence in his diagnosis. That was impossible. He didn't have a diagnosis. But he felt consultation in the field of psychiatry was different than in medicine. Here—groping about in uncharted depths of a human mind there was so little to go by; very little in spite of the professional confidence exhibited at conventions; irregardless of the high-sounding terms bandied about so casually.

With this the case, about all a man had to go on, when the chips were down—or rather, when the patient was on the couch—was his own confidence in himself. If he couldn't go forward without the bolstering-up of three or four other opinions, he'd best get out of the profession and make a living somewhere else.

So he was going ahead on his own and there was no further excuse for delay. He reached over and snapped on the tape recorder at his elbow and said,

"Are you quite comfortable?"

"Not—comfortable."

"That isn't true. You are comfortable. You're lying on a soft bed and you feel light as a feather."

"Light—comfortable."

"What is your name?"

"Rachel March."

"Where do you live?"

"Larchmont, New York."

"Who do you live with?"

"Aunt—uncle."

"What are their names?"

"Aunt Lucy—Uncle Will."

"Are you happy?"

"Not—happy."

Doctor Logan paused. The identification seemed strong enough. But at this stage it had been strong before. He said, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five—years old."

"But you weren't always twenty-five. Once you were a little girl and now we're going back to that time."

The limp hands tightened. "No. Afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll go with you. We'll go together."

"Afraid—"

"Now you are fifteen years old. You're excited and happy because you're going to take a trip to Marchwood where your mother and father and big sister lived."

"Marchwood — The Blue Cottage—Fury Creek. I—"

Now an amazing transformation took place. Rachel March stopped talking and began to giggle. Adulthood had obviously slipped away from her, but that which took its place was not the logically expected childhood toward which Doctor Logan had pointed her. The giggle, the high-pitched chuckle, was juvenile in timber, but there was more to it—a chilling overtone of hatred—a nerve-tightening oral wave-length that could be described only as obscene, indecent—an intangible gibbering that stank of dark places and evil things.

Doctor Logan straightened in his chair and laid the pad aside. He raised a finger as a signal to the nurse, but this was not necessary. She was leaning forward and her professional aplomb slipped to the extent of a muttered, "My God—"

It was cut off by a thin, taut scream from the patient as her teeth were suddenly bared and she appeared to be fighting the battle of Michael and Lucifer as she lay there on the couch. "No—no—it's mine! You can't have it! No—no. It's mine—mine!"

Well aware of the risk involved in sudden return, Doctor Logan snapped on a strong spotlight that stood at the head of the couch. It blazed down against Rachel March's eyes as Logan snapped his fingers close to her ear. She had been preconditioned for this return, but Logan's heart hammered in his chest as the blue eyes opened wide. Then Rachel's throat tightened and he knew she was conscious.

Then it came again—the agony of ego-rocking terror,

so strong there seemed to be an animal odor to it, and Logan seized Rachel's arms and leaned across her body. It took every ounce of his male strength to hold the slim one-hundred-ten-pound girl on the couch.

"Quick," he said.

The nurse came forward and there was another scream, a single, sustained note of pure terror, as the needle plunged home. The hypo was calculated to be swift but even the brief span before unconsciousness exhausted every muscle in Logan's straining body.

Finally he fell back in his chair and looked up at the wide-eyed nurse. "Did you think I was kidding?"

"Good lord! I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I."

"The fright—the fear in her eyes—in her face. There was agony, as though she were being tortured on a rack."

"Neatly put. But she's under now. I've got a bottle out in my desk and I need a drink . . ."

After a shot of rye, Doctor Logan was able to smile. "That was what I bumped into the last time—alone. When you were on your vacation. And it was touch and go until I got a needle into her arm."

"I'm surprised you risked it again."

Normally such a remark by a nurse to a doctor would have been impudence bordering on sacrilege; nurses are not supposed to question a doctor's procedure. But Marcia Adams had been with Logan for some time and there is a natural informality in a two-person operation. Also, Logan wasn't a stickler for the rules.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have, but I did some probing in between. I worked through her later years and while the keynote to the whole thing is some kind of terror, it didn't get out of hand."

"At least you learned where the critical point lies."

"Somewhere between the age of twelve and fifteen years. But at that time she was going to school, her home life was peaceful and completely normal. What could have happened to her?"

"Is there anything exceptional in the background?"

"Yes and no. She's a March, and the clan itself is quite interesting. It goes back unbroken to before the Revolution. They've got a huge estate up in New England. A place called Marchwood

where Rachel's father and mother and twelve-year-old sister were killed."

"An accident?"

"Two accidents. Rachel's father, Thomas, fell off a horse and split his skull on a rock."

"Did Rachel see the accident?"

"No. She was less than a year old at the time. The death of Thomas March hit Rachel's mother, Joan, pretty hard. There were two other March brothers and William and his wife Lucy, took little Rachel to live with them in Larchmont. Until Joan recovered from the shock of her husband's death, they felt one daughter would be enough for her to take care of."

"And then Joan March and the older daughter were killed?"

"Yes—about six months later. There isn't much known about their deaths. They lived in a rather secluded place called Blue Cottage, back in the woods beside a creek that ran between high stone bluffs. The mother and daughter were found on the rocks below. It was decided that they'd been walking hand-in-hand and someone's foot slipped. With no witnesses, that was as good an explanation as any."

"You said there were three brothers."

"That's right. The third one, Dane March married a girl named Penelope Higgins. They stayed at Marchwood and they're still there. Do a little farming and keep the place together."

Marcia Adams corked Logan's bottle and put it back into the drawer. "A tragic family," she said, "but it's hard to see how it could have affected Rachel. She wasn't around for any of it."

"Lucy March took her back only once—when she was fifteen years old, but it didn't work out. The child woke up screaming the first night and got hysterical. She had to be taken away."

"It seems the answer might lie at Marchwood regardless. What's the girl's past history?"

"Nothing too rough until lately. Nightmares — the screaming kind—up through the years, but her aunt was inclined to attribute them to high-strung sensitivity. They subsided for a while and then Rachel got herself engaged and things started all over again. More of the same, and worse. Until she broke off her engagement and refused to see the young man. Quite re-

cently, she began having spells of terror she doesn't remember after they pass. Yet, even when normal, there's a vague fear that tells her she shouldn't marry. The only answer is to get down into the subconscious and see what's frightening her. We have to reach the initial trauma.

"You tried that today and the result was close to disaster."

"Right. But I think we've got to move ahead. If we stand still, we face complete inner breakdown. There are some strange angles relative to Marchwood."

"Such as—?"

"She knows far more about the place than she ought to. Under questioning, she's mentioned the Blue Cottage, hollyhocks in the backyard, an elm-tree split by lightning. Yet her aunt assures me they've been very careful never to mention anything about the place or any details of the accidents; only the barest explanations as were necessary."

"That's still not proof that she hasn't had access to the information."

"Of course not, but I've got enough to convince me that, as you said, the answer lies at Marchwood. And I think we've got to go out there and see if we can't come to grips with the core of the thing."

Marcia Adams shook her head doubtfully. "We saw what happened in there on the couch. If the psychic wound is as raw and dangerous as it appears to be—"

"—then drastic surgery may be necessary. She should be coming around shortly. Look in on her, will you?"

Logan sat thinking for some time. He valued Marcia Adams greatly. She was a fine sounding board against which to bounce ideas in order to get their true ring. And as a result of this particular talk, he made his decision.

He and his perplexing patient were going to Marchwood . . .

Penny March read the letter to Dane after supper; after the chores were done and he was half-dozing in his easy chair from which he would soon rise and go off to bed.

The beginning of the letter didn't interest him greatly; the formal self-introduction of a man he never heard of; a psychiatrist—filled no doubt, with silly ideas about what went on in people's heads. A Doctor John Logan; probably with a funny beard and thick-lensed glasses like

the comedy characters in the old movies on television.

So Dane was already nodding as Penny droned on, peering at each word though her steel-rimmed glasses as though in disapproval.

But somewhere past the middle, Dane perked up—about where Penny read:

"—and so, with your permission, I would like to bring Rachel to Marchwood. Only for a short visit, I'm sure, and we would do everything possible to avoid interrupting your routine.

I truly believe the visit might—"

"Hold up, now," Dane said. "What's he want to bring the child here for? Last time, she woke up screaming her head off."

"Dane! She's not a child anymore. She's a grown woman, now."

Dane pondered. It had certainly been a long time. Took a thing like this to make a man stop a minute and calculate his years. "Let's see, Sam took little Rachel away in '32, wasn't it?"

That's right. She was a baby, then."

"She'd be around 25 or 26 now. Hmmm. Time sure kites by."

"It does. You're an old man and I'm an old woman but the point is—how do I answer this letter? This doctor wants to bring Rachel here."

"What for? Is she sick?"

"Dane, you haven't heard a word of what I read. He says, no. She's going to get married and—"

"Then why doesn't she? What's she want to come here for?"

Penny's stern blue eyes had softened and she was off on a memory-train of her own. "Rachel was such a sweet, quiet little thing. And so frail. A body wondered how those spindly little legs held her up."

Dane got up from his chair and walked over to stare into the flames of the small fire Penny had laid in the big fireplace. It was late summer and the nights were a bit chilly. Soon, they would close off ninety percent of this huge monstrosity called Marchwood Manor and huddle for the winter in the four little back rooms. Silly to heat space where no one had lived for more than a generation.

He turned and faced his wife. "Maybe it's about time we quit futtering around and spoke right out with what we're both thinking."

"Maybe it is."

"Seems to me if there's something out of line with little Rachel—"

"Not little anymore, Dane. I told you—"

"All right—with big Rachel—this would be the last place in the world to bring her."

"Well, evidently the doctor doesn't think so. Twenty years is a long time, Dane and she was only a baby when— Penny hesitated. "—when it happened."

Dane frowned and grumbled deep in his throat. "Guess, we can't turn 'em down. After all, Rachel's got a right to be here if she wants to come. Any member of the March family's got a right to come."

"Then I'll get a letter off to this doctor."

"Uh-huh. You get a letter off. I'll get to bed . . ."

Doctor John Logan smiled at the girl who sat beside him and said, "We're flying over Marchwood, Rachel."

The girl, startled out of a reverie, smiled back and looked down out of the cabin window. Below, lay a panorama of rolling green. "It's beautiful," Rachel said. "I can see Fury Creek—clear over there where it empties into the Basin River."

"It is beautiful. Look. Those yellow patches. Some of the trees are already turning."

"There's March Manor."

Logan, even while appearing to be interested in what lay below, had been watching Rachel March with veiled keenness. He looked down, now, and saw the huge, sprawling roofs and chimneys that marked the manor house of storied Marchwood.

"They could billet a regiment in there," he said.

Then he turned his whole attention back to Rachel as she grasped his wrist with sudden convulsive strength in her grip. "Over there! I can see it! Deep in the trees. That open spot by the creek!"

"What can you see?"

"The Blue Cottage!"

"Rachel!" Logan spoke sharply, but when Rachel looked around she saw only a casual smile on his face. "It's been a bumpy ride. These small charter planes bounce around like toy balloons. But we'll be setting down shortly."

There was sudden bright fear in Rachel's eyes. "Maybe we shouldn't have come."

"Nonsense. You should be looking forward to it. Why, the March name is legend. You should be proud. That's

your ancestral home down there and you're coming back for a visit. Your aunt and uncle will be waiting."

"Doctor — what's wrong with me. Why am I frightened?"

"You're no doubt awed by the vastness of it. Remember, you haven't seen it for a long, long time."

"But it seems only yesterday."

"I wish you'd tell me about it — about Marchwood — it's background."

"But I have told—"

"Tell me again. I'm like a kid who enjoys hearing a favorite fairy tale over and over."

And it was with the unthinking trust of a child that Rachel slipped her hand into his. "Marchwood was originally a grant from the English king before the Revolution," she said, her tone indeed that of a story-teller. "My great-grandfather Isaiah March lived to be almost one hundred years old. He was a very remarkable man. He fought with Lafayette and after the war he was one of the few men who managed to hold onto a royal grant and obtain recognition of his ownership. There were Marches before him of course, but we always think of our family as starting with Isaiah."

"He must have been a real old fire-eater."

"He was. He built Marchwood Manor and the whole thousand acres of Marchwood itself stands intact to this day. The wills of the succeeding sons required it. They were patterned almost word-for-word after the original, iron-bound document of Great - Grandfather Isaiah. Many Marches were born here. Some died. Most of them profited from the strong blood of old Isaiah and made honored names for themselves in many parts of the world."

Logan was aware that Rachel's recital was directly from a summary by the March family historian. He had heard it before and it was a trifle boring but it had served its purpose here—that of diverting Rachel's mind—and now the plane was dropping onto a field on the far side of Marchwood; several miles from the manor, but this was the only place where the hilly barony offered level, ground sufficient for a plane.

The pilot, a pleasant-faced, blonde young man, seemed reluctant to leave them in this wilderness until a battered station wagon rattled out of

the forest along a narrow road and a white-haired, somber old man got stiffly out and stood with one hand raised as a shield for his eyes against the lowering sun.

Damnedest, gloomiest place I ever saw, the pilot thought. Why in hell would anyone want to come here? Oh, well, each to his own.

Actually, the overall gloom was an illusion easily cast upon anyone used to open country and city streets. So far as John Logan was concerned, the gloomiest part of the arrival was Dane March's lack of welcoming warmth. He was civil enough, but he had a hard time drumming up a smile. Was he also afraid? Logan wondered.

The drive back to Marchwood Manor was pleasant enough, but Logan was beginning to doubt his own wisdom in bringing Rachel here. He'd been justified, however. No matter what transpired, it would be no more objectionable than the mental disintegration that was so clearly indicated.

As they approached Marchwood Manor, he leaned close to Rachel and asked, "Does it all look familiar to you?"

"I was here before. Not out to the Blue Cottage, though. And yet that's clearer in my mind, somehow."

"You were less than a year old when you last saw the Blue Cottage."

"That may be. But there are times when I'm back there—standing in the front yard—deathly afraid of—"

"—Afraid of what?" He'd blocked her off from discussing it before the plane landed, but with her mind turning stubbornly back to the house beside Fury Creek, he let her expand on the memory—if indeed that's what it was.

But now she veered away as though in fright. "I don't know—I can't think. But there's something terrible—"

She broke off when they pulled up to a door of the Manor where a gray-haired woman shaded her eyes and waited. "Rachel!"

"Aunt Penny! It's so wonderful to see you."

"And seeing you is a positive revelation, child. Such a spindly little ghost you were last time. But now look at you."

"Aunt Penny. This is Doctor Logan."

He took her hand. "I'd like it to be John—or at least plain *mister*. *Doctor* makes me feel stuffy and bearded."

"It was so nice of you to bring Rachel up here to a pair

of lonely old folks. The good Lord'll bless you for it. And now let's get inside. I've got a pot of strong tea brewing."

Logan noticed that Dane March hadn't said a word during the whole time of introductions. He'd eyed the proceedings in silent glumness. This didn't prove anything, though. Logan might well be doing the old gentleman an injustice. You couldn't tell about strangers. Dane March's seeming hostility might be an entirely characteristic trait; it could easily be an illusion created by shyness and stiff, Lincolnesque features.

Dane March said, "I'll put the car away."

"Hurry," Penny said. "The tea will get cold. And now you two come right on in."

John Logan followed slowly, his eyes wandering over the huge shell of former glory named Marchwood Manor. What ambition had goaded Isaiah March into building such a place? Perhaps the urge to have his name live after him; to put the mark of his personality on the land.

This was not important, however. The vital issue was whether or not the secret of Rachel's strange terror could be found in this place. Or whether she was fated to plunge finally into the darkness that was closing around her mind . . .

"Now that you're here," Dane March said, "I suspect you'll want to roam around a little and look the place over."

He made this statement the following morning, his attention on Rachel, with only side glances at John Logan.

Rachel felt the full impact of his deep-set eyes and curled her feet tight back against the rung of her chair. Aunt Penny was a dear, but Uncle Dane seemed to be angry about something. Didn't he want her at Marchwood Manor? He seemed so cold—so unapproachable. How did you go about telling an uncle you hadn't seen since you were a child that you wanted him to be your friend?

Rachel wanted to put her arms around his big shoulders and ask him, but instead, she sat very still and said, "If it's all right with you, Uncle Dane."

"Nothing wrong with it at all if you're careful and don't go in the wrong direction. There's plenty of woods to see west of the house and down southward toward the river. East is all right, too, except you won't be able to get over

the rock ridge that cuts across below the orchard. What I want to warn you about is stay away from the north direction. It's bad up there. I could get lost myself in those thickets and gorges along Fury Creek. Ain't been a human foot set down in those wilds for twenty years and if you got lost even a helicopter wouldn't be no good at finding you. So mind my warning."

"Yes, Uncle Dane."

"And now I'll say good-bye to the both of you for a while. We ain't retired, here. Penny and me raise some chickens and farm a little on the flat land and the work don't wait on visitors. You're both welcome here, though, long as you stay out of trouble."

After Dane strode from the room, he pushed his great head back in to say, "The sky tells that there'll be a bad thunder storm sometime this afternoon, so if you go anywhere you'd better plan to be back in the house by twelve."

After he left there was a moment of silence as though his going had left a vacuum that had to fill itself. Then Penny bustled around the table and gave Rachel a brisk kiss.

"Now don't you pay him any mind, child. All the March men sour up in their old age. We're just a pair of grouchy country bumpkins set in our ways. But we want you to like us."

"I do like you, Aunt Penny. I like you both."

Penny paused suddenly as she was turning away. Oblivious of Logan's alert, searching eyes, she looked down at Rachel and said, "Land sakes, child. You've got the body of a woman, but there's moments I'd swear you haven't grown a day older—not inside."

She regretted her frankness instantly and began furiously clearing the table. Logan got to his feet and began filling his pipe from a leather tobacco pouch. Rachel had covered her reaction well, but Logan caught it and patted her shoulder. "Think I'll stretch my legs a bit," he said.

He left the dining room. Penny had also vanished—kitchenward—and Rachel was alone. She sat motionless for a few moments. Then, trying to drive Aunt Penny's words from her mind she hurried from the room and out of the house.

The eastern sky was clear blue, ablaze with summer sun, but over the western treetops stood a line of black clouds; a dark, menacing ridge that

Rachel sensed as being somehow akin to the darkness in her own mind.

She moved across the lawn, then stopped and stood motionless, fighting. But fighting what? She didn't know. And she knew that Doctor Logan, for all his books and apt phrases and glib names for everything, didn't know either. That was the most frightening part. The sense of being all alone. Even in the midst of those who loved you and wanted to help, you were still alone. That was when the terror became almost unbearable; when it made you want to scream and run out into the street and cry, *Help me, somebody. Please — please, won't somebody help me?*

But of course you didn't do that because now you were grown up and going to be married and how would it be if your own children found you weren't anything more than a frightened child yourself?

Suddenly, Rachel's whole body quivered. There was something; something new; a change; a promise; as though she had finally defeated whatever lay in the black dark and that it had conceded defeat and fled off into a terror of its own.

A new feeling. Warm, strong, confident. And wonderful. A beckoning and a promise. She laughed. A treasure hunt. That was what it would be like. But the search would be for a different sort of treasure. A power, invisible, but stronger than anything on earth. Even though, still far away and but dimly sensed, it was making her understand how ineffective and contemptible were the people who didn't have it. Uncle Dane, Aunt Penny, and —yes, even Doctor Logan.

A new power. And she had only to follow its call.

So it didn't seem at all strange to Rachel that she ran swiftly and confidently into a place she had never been before; into the big, white barn that towered among the lesser buildings around it, second in size only to the house itself.

It seemed entirely natural that she thread her way among pieces of rusted and forgotten machinery until she found a small, narrow stairway stretching away into upper dimness.

She climbed it with confidence, with a breathless tingling that rang through every nerve. And when the dimness turned to pitch-black darkness, she still went confidently

on, stepping off into emptiness, but finding a stoutly-anchored catwalk beneath her feet. And on, along the whole length of the barn, to open a door at the exact spot where she knew it would be. She laughed and clapped her hands, having known it would be like this.

A tiny room high against the ridgepole of the barn.

Covering one wall, were several iron wheels, each with a handle protruding from its rim. They were thick with rust and long-unused, but Rachel touched them confidently, knowing exactly what they were for. This one opened half the small ventilator-windows along the ridgepole. This one, the other half on that side. There were two other wheels for the windows on the opposite side of the ridgepole, but Rachel gave them little attention.

From one corner, she picked up an object thick with dust and beat it against the wall until it could be seen for what it was. But even before she cleaned it, she knew what the object would be—an old calico doll with one leg gone.

She tossed it aside contemptuously and stood for a few moments looking out the tiny round window at the scene below. From here, everything looked small, like a lot of doll houses, even the trees appearing as miniature decorations on some child's panorama.

But she turned away from the window quickly. She hadn't come here for the wheels or the doll or to look down on the estate from a high perch.

She had come here because the power had beckoned and directed her; had drawn her as surely as a magnet draws a steel scrap. And it had not betrayed her because here it was even greater in intensity. Here, it was more defined and was able to direct her more articulately toward the greater goal.

The greater goal—the end of her long search out there in the forest . . .

She laughed again—suddenly giddy with the delight of it. That was what it had been all her life. The fear had been a mirage; a mask through which she had to go in order to follow the search for power.

Out there in the forest there would be a road, overgrown, now, with weeds and vines, but it would be there, waiting to point the way.

She went down and out of the barn and into the forest, going carefully, craftily, lest

Doctor Logan or Uncle Dane catch sight of her and barred the way.

Soon she was beyond danger of this, and deep among the trees, she found the road.

The power pulsed stronger, now, and she began to run, following the new, wild surge that came from within her own being, yet was out in front of her, laughing, beckoning her on . . .

Dane March was repairing a section of chicken wire that had been loosened by the driving wind of the last storm; resetting two posts that had been torn loose. But he couldn't get his mind on his work this morning. The comfortable routine of Marchwood had been disrupted, which was bad enough, but the disruption was particularly disturbing to Dane because of a feeling he had; a feeling that somehow the past was in danger of being raked up again. Old bones, he felt, deserved to lie buried after twenty years. What good lay in opening old crypts that had been sealed for so long? Walled away from the present, there was no call to go digging back among the ruins.

Of course, he had no proof that any such thing would occur, but that doctor bringing Rachel here had a dangerous smell about it. Maybe things would be all right, though.

But Dane couldn't work and finally gave it up. He put his tools away and then stood facing the north. A thick barrier of trees and undergrowth stood sharp against the pasture land on that side of the out-buildings, and Dane remembered his warning. He'd told Rachel and the doctor to roam in other directions, that the north section was dangerous.

But had he been quite honest with himself in giving that warning? Had the danger been his true reason for wanting them to stay out of there?

He told himself that it had been the reason. He didn't want either of them snooping up there because they could get lost or be killed. That could happen, he told himself grimly, long before they came anywhere near the Blue Cottage.

The Blue Cottage. It had been a long time. He'd turned his back on the place over twenty years before—when the two broken bodies had been carried out.

Winter and summer—summer and winter—it had stood up there in the wild country; a terrible memory locked in

by the bluffs of Fury Creek and the thick tangles of the north acres. Perhaps it was no longer standing? Perhaps the walls had weakened and gone down under the year-after-year pounding of winter storms.

Perhaps, or perhaps not, but suddenly, Dane had to know. He had to see the place once more. He was an old man now, but the memory of the things that had occurred at the Blue Cottage when he was young and vital and the urges in a man's blood made crazy demands, stirred within him.

He had to see Blue Cottage once more.

He considered it for a few more moments, then locked the tool shed and turned his footsteps in the direction of the north forest.

The going wasn't hard; not for anyone who knew the way. The road, once wide enough for a team and wagon and clear enough to take a blooded horse at full speed, was thick overgrown, but it was still there. And a man who remembered could find his way easily—even an old man with stiff joints—while a stranger might flounder and get hopelessly lost in the ravines and rocks fifty feet on either side.

As Dane pushed his way through the knee-high grass and brambles, it seemed to him that the forest on either side had gotten thicker and more gloomy. It's silence seemed a brooding contemplation, a living mood that made incidents and events of the past fade even deeper into the morass of time.

He rounded a turn in the road and stopped to orientate. Yes, this was the place where Tom was killed. This was the turn where his horse had skidded in the mud of a sudden shower and sent him hurtling forward head first.

Dane pushed off the road and kicked around in the high grass. The rock itself. There it was, with its sharp skull-splitting edge still unblunted by the years.

Dane scowled. If Tom had minded a bit—been less wild and harum-scarum, he wouldn't have knocked his own brains out. Then none of it would have happened. One death spiralling into two and three and all the upset and misery that went before them—and after. That was how it had to be figured; Tom's mad destiny sweeping him away and those around him.

Dane walked back to the road and moved on, and be-

fore long he came to a place where the road ended in an open pocket and there it was.

The Blue Cottage.

It wasn't blue anymore. All the paint had peeled away and the shutters hung askew on bent and broken hinges or had been long-since knocked off.

The fence was down and weeds stood high in the yard and the old garden. With the silence and desolation quivering in the heat of a hot summer day.

A roar of sullen thunder drew Dane's eyes skyward and he saw that the storm was moving in from the west faster than he'd expected. The dark cloud-bank had broken into fast-punging heads and was racing for the sun.

He walked on past the front of the house and into the trees on the far side. A few more feet and he could hear the pounding water of Fury Creek and then it was there below him, a foaming chute at this point in the deep rocky gorge.

This was where it had happened; where the end of it all had come about. But had it been the end? Dane turned and looked back toward the house. He was not a sensitive man; he was a realist, stern, practical, down-to-earth. Yet even he could vaguely sense something here; some living evil that hadn't died in the old tragedy.

Perhaps, rather, it had been born there—the potent brooding uncleanness that lay over the Blue Cottage like an invisible sickness, an undying plague.

Dane suddenly jerked himself out of the mood into which he had slipped. What foolishness was this? An old man's conscience coming back to haunt him? An overactive imagination, that's all.

Then, as he took a forward step, the hot summer scene changed as if by magic. The black thunderheads swept over the sun, blotting the day out into deep dusk as a wall of cold rain hit the forest and the clearing. Thunder split the black sky and a gash of lightning flashed down like a livid finger to point at the dark house of evil. So realistic was the transformation that Dane heard again the shrill tearing scream he had heard before—on that terrible night so long ago. Thus can a man's memory rekindle imagination.

But it was not imagination. The scream came again and as Dane watched, frozen with shock, a woman ran from the

front door of the Blue Cottage.

Her shrieks of terror were like knives slicing into his ears as he forced movement into his legs and ran toward her. She was screaming words, now, senseless words: "No—no! It's mine You've got no right. It's mine—mine. Pity me! Leave me alone! It's mine!"

Dane was beside her, and she turned and looked into his eyes and he saw the animal terror. She flung herself upon him and her voice dropped to a whimper. "Help me! Please help me. Take me away from here!"

Then it was over. The girl went limp and as he lifted her, she hung from his arms as though dead. But he could feel her breathing and the beat of her heart as he stood there with the rain sluicing down from the black sky.

Rachel March, looking so much like her mother that Dane could hardly make himself believe this wasn't a segment out of an old nightmare. He looked down into her white face, his eyes smouldering.

Why should it go on any further? Why shouldn't this be the final end? Perhaps that was how it was meant to be. Maybe he himself had been ordained to be the tool for ending it. Why had the girl come back otherwise? Why had destiny drawn her here for no apparent reason?

He raised his head and heard the thundering Fury Creek even above the pounding of the storm . . .

John Logan was helping Penny March peel apples in the kitchen of Marchwood Manor. He sat on the edge of the table, eating more than he put into the bowl and wondering just how to go about opening the subject of Rachel March with this prim-mouthed New England woman. He was hesitant.

But Penny solved his problem by opening it herself. "And now," she said, "I want you to tell me exactly what's wrong with Rachel."

"That's rather hard to say."

"That's what I expected—beating around the bush. You doctors aren't happy unless you're making things complicated for us ordinary folk. But I want a straight answer, young man."

"I'm speaking as straight as I can, Mrs. March. I don't know what's wrong with Rachel."

"You'll have to talk a little louder. That storm against

the windows most deafens a body."

"I honestly don't know what's wrong with her. Troubles of the mind aren't as easy to figure out as measels or gall bladder trouble. All I can say is that Rachel has terrible dreams. She's afraid of something."

"Can't she tell you what it is?"

"I wish it was that simple. Actually, it's a little hard to explain. She carries a certain conscious fear in her mind all the time because she knows something is wrong, but she has what you might call spells in which she experiences a kind of terror we can have no conception of. Then, when the spells are over, she doesn't remember having had them."

Penny found this hard to believe. She looked at Logan as though she thought he was making some kind of a joke. "That's ridiculous."

"To us, perhaps. But to Rachel, it's very real and if it goes on, her mental structure won't be able to stand up under the punishment and she'll probably go incurably insane."

Penny didn't understand but she was at least partially convinced of Logan's sincerity. "But it's still ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with the March blood. There's never been any insanity in the line."

"That's encouraging, but it doesn't solve our present problem."

"Of course there was some intermarriage long ago. I believe one of Isaiah's grandfather's married his sister—a common law marriage if that's what they had in those days." Penny frowned. "It was struck out of the family tree but it was a fact."

Logan put another apple slice into his mouth and looked out the window into the sluicing rain. It had come on very suddenly and no doubt Rachel had found shelter in one of the out-buildings on the property.

Logan said, "I thought perhaps you could tell me a little about Rachel's parents and her sister. Mrs. Lucy March told me what she knew but she and her husband weren't really very close to the Tom Marches."

"Lucy and Will weren't very close to any of the family. Not that I'm blaming them. They had their own affairs to tend to. And they responded handsomely when they were needed. Taking little Rachel."

"I'd like to ask a rather

personal question and please don't take offense."

"I don't offend easy, young man, although I might tell you to mind your own business."

"Please do if you think I have it coming. What I wanted to know was why you and Mr. March didn't take Rachel. It seems that might have been logical. You have no children and you were close, so that the child could have still been close to her mother."

Penny March thought carefully, then replied with a counter-question. "Tell me—what did Lucy have to say about Joan—Tom's wife?"

"Not a great deal. She said Joan was terribly broken up over her husband's death. That was about all."

Penny sniffed. "As long as you're getting facts they might as well be the right ones. The truth is, Joan wasn't any more hurt by Tom's death than the average wife losing a husband. Just as much and no more. The truth was that Lucy wanted a baby without the trouble of having her own. It's my opinion—but just an opinion, mind you—that there was an agreement between them when Lucy took Rachel that she could have her for good."

"I see."

"I'll say one thing. Joan did have her hands full with that little hellion, Dinah."

"That was Rachel's older sister."

"She was going on thirteen when the tragedy happened. And it may seem a terrible thing for a blood relative to say, but the child would never have come to any good. I'm sure of that. She had bad blood in her from somewhere."

"Just how did she demonstrate this—this badness?"

"In every way a child could. If an animal was hurt, I could be sure Dinah was in back of it. She was sassy, impudent, and down-right clever about it. You asked why Dane and I didn't take Rachel. That was one of the reasons so far as I was concerned. I was actually afraid for the baby's welfare any time she was alone with Dinah and I was glad when Lucy took her beyond Dinah's reach. Dinah was terribly jealous of her mother giving attention to the baby. I think the little devil actually resented Tom and Joan being husband and wife."

"How did Joan react to these objectionable traits in her daughter."

"She wasn't fully aware of

them. To understand you'd have had to know Joan. She was no prize package herself when you came right down to it. Tom was wild, too, of course—not at all like Will and Dane—and he and Joan were a good match. But the truth was that Joan was man crazy. She didn't belong out here in the country. She should have gone to the city after Tom was killed, but—well, she didn't."

Logan looked up and saw that the storm was over and the sun was out. He had a feeling Penny wasn't going to tell him much more and he didn't want to lose her confidence by pushing too hard during their first talk. Also, he wanted to go out and find Rachel. He hadn't seen her for several hours and he was a little uneasy as to where she might be.

He dropped off the table and put down his knife. "I'm afraid I wasn't much help, Mrs. March. I ate more than I contributed to the pie."

"That's all right, young man. A woman never expects to get much help out of—Good heavens and earth!" Penny March gasped abruptly.

Both she and Logan turned as the door was pushed open and Dane March entered, carrying Rachel in his arms as though she were dead.

"Dane! What happened?"

"She went against my warning and got lost in the north woods. When the storm hit, she got scared. I found her up there running around in a panic."

Penny said, "Bring the poor child to her room. Is she hurt bad?"

Logan checked Rachel over. There appeared to be no injuries and he left Penny to rub her down and get her into bed. She didn't return to consciousness but when Logan went back a little while later, she was sleeping naturally.

When he came back downstairs, he heard Penny and Dane talking in the kitchen and paused to eavesdrop.

Penny was saying, "The poor child. Now she'll probably come down with a bad cold."

"There's something bad wrong with the girl."

"What's wrong with her, Dane?"

"I don't know. But there was no call to get that scared over a little thunder and lightning."

"Where did you find her?"

"At the Blue Cottage."

"That's strange."

"She was inside. Then she came out screaming to high

heaven. She thought someone was chasing her the way she carried on. Then she passed out and I brought her home."

"But why did she go there? She couldn't have remembered."

"Probably just stumbled onto the road and kept walking."

Penny appeared to be doubtful. "I don't know. That old road would be pretty hard to find."

"I'm thinking she ought to be taken home. It was just like the last time except then it happened in bed. I don't think it's healthy, having her around here."

"I grant you one thing," Penny said. "The past should stay dead and buried."

Logan backed away and left the house by another door and walked to the edge of the north forest across the lawn. He stared at the wall of ominous trees, dripping, now, with the rain from the sudden downpour.

What mystery lay beyond those trees? What terrible memory kept reaching up through the years to plague an innocent girl until her sanity hung in the balance?

And more important—what could be done about it?

He realized his feet were soaking wet and went back to the house to change his shoes. As he came from his room, he looked in on Rachel and found her awake, lying very still, looking up at the ceiling.

He went to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

She turned her eyes on him, quiet eyes, but clouded with bewilderment. "Why am I here? I don't remember going to bed."

"What do you remember?"

"We're at Marchwood."

"That's right. We came here yesterday. Do you remember having breakfast this morning and leaving the house?"

"Yes. I felt good. Strong and unafraid and happy. That I remember."

"What did you do after that?"

Rachel closed her eyes and tried to remember. "There was a place I had to go."

"To the Blue Cottage?"

"No—no, not at first. Another place."

"I saw you go into the barn."

"I don't know—I can't remember. I only know that I don't feel that way anymore. I'm frightened. For a while it was gone but now it's back stronger than ever."

"Take it easy."

Tears were forming. "Doc-

tor Logan. I know, now! I'll never be any better. I'm going out of my mind and I want to die. I'd rather die than go crazy!"

"That's nonsense and I want you to stop talking that way. We're going to find out what's wrong. That's why we came here."

Rachel looked across at the chair beside the bed. "Why are my clothes all wet?"

"There was a storm. You got caught away from the house."

"I remember that—yes, I remember the storm. Doctor, did I go to the Blue Cottage?"

"Yes, you went into the north woods. Uncle Dane found you at the Blue Cottage and brought you home."

"But I don't remember that—I don't remember seeing it or being there."

"It will all come back in due time."

Rachel's eyes were terror-haunted as she stared at the ceiling. "I only know that I'm more afraid of the Blue Cottage than anything in the world. Yet I've got to go back there. I've got to keep going back again and again until—"

"Until what?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Oh, Doctor Logan—help me—please help me."

And Logan cursed his impotence; the lack of knowledge that made him a bystander at the scene of this corroding tragedy. "I'll help you," he said. "But now you must go to sleep. I'll sit here beside your bed. I won't leave you alone."

He sat there for a long time—even after Rachel had dropped off into slumber. He looked down into her sad, ravaged face and carefully put the hand that had been gripping his under the coverlet.

He got to his feet and stood looking at her, assailed by the gravest doubts he had since the beginning of the case. Was he doing the right thing? Did Rachel belong out here? Perhaps he should have kept her in the city and fought the thing with all the modern tools that were being used to combat mental illness. Shock therapy—all the rest of it.

But he'd followed his own instincts and that would have been fine if his own mind were at stake. But he was gambling with another's and any mistakes he made were for keeps.

But at least, now, he knew what was plaguing Rachel. Possession. Something was trying to take her mind and body away from her. Some live thing that had died or

something that had never lived. All her doubts and terrors and lapses added up to only one thing; something he'd suspected but up to this moment hadn't allowed himself to believe. But now he knew and he admitted the truth.

Rachel, most of her life, had been fighting to keep possession of her own body.

But fighting against whom? Or what . . . ?

Dinah knew there had been a change; knew something had occurred to end the raging monotony and forecast a finish.

In the gray place between the worlds, where she waited, there was no time nor space nor any of the things for living. Yet she lived, subsisting on the mental things—held where she was by the tentacles of evil that overlapped from the world she had known—the world that had robbed her.

Dinah was no longer a mind—that was what she sought—a mind, a structure, a tool with which she could transform into thought and into living, the terrible urge and desire that made up her conscious entity.

She was nourished and kept existent in that gray place between the worlds by knowledge of great wrong and injustice. She knew that had been Mother, but Mother had not waited in the place between the worlds. Responding to the great cosmic laws, Mother had changed after the great, wrenching rebirth through which they had passed. She had become content, passive, waiting with all the souls in the gray place without fear or regret. In a sense, she stopped being Mother and became something else, but Dinah's memory remained—tag-ends of recollections bound her to the world she'd left and tangled themselves together to form the urge and the rage.

There had been injustice and the need to right it was a part of the urge—injustice to Mother and injustice to Dinah. The injustice to Dinah was far more potent than the other. Mother had lived and was content to take the next great step, but Dinah had not lived.

Life, for Dinah, had been wonderful, fiercely vital, ecstatically delightful, but just when she was beginning to partake of its freedoms and unfolding mysteries, it had been snatched away in a single, great tearing shock. She had been able to live and

breathe and run and laugh and hate—then it was gone and there was nothing but the gray place and a mixing with the meek and empty ones.

But Dinah had her urge, her rage, and out of its substance she had been able to form a bridge upon which to return. By dint of demand and no knowledge of space or time other than in misty vagueness, Dinah had been able to make herself an ever-existent driving force in the world to which she sought reentrance. To the place where she'd been cheated.

From her rage and hatred she formed a picture of the lucky one. Rachel was the lucky one's name and even during the moment she'd inhabited the world of wonder, Dinah had hated Rachel.

She had hated anything or anyone who had stolen from her the loving attentions of Mother. There had been Father who did this and she had hated Father, but had gotten him away from Mother—into the gray place.

She hadn't really meant to get Father away from Mother but it had happened because of something she'd done. Father had come by on his horse, riding fast as he always did and Dinah had risen up suddenly at the edge of the road and screamed; wanting to do this to Father because he sent her away from Mother and took Mother in his arms many times while Dinah suffered in the knowing of what they did together.

So she stood up and screamed to frighten Father, but his horse was even more frightened and Father fell off and hit a rock. Blood and a dark pulp came from Father's broken head and he went to the place between the worlds and Dinah was frightened for a while.

But she ran home and later Mother took Dinah in her arms and it was very nice with Father gone so everything turned out all right.

And she didn't have to do anything to hateful Rachel. They came and took her away and Dinah and Mother were alone and that was wonderful.

Later, she'd been afraid she would have to do something to get another—an Uncle Dane—away from Mother but that had become unimportant.

Everything was unimportant except Rachel. Rachel had been the lucky one. She hadn't been sent to the place between the worlds. She'd been given the things that

should have been Dinah's—life, the freedom to live, a body to use.

And Dinah was going to take what was rightfully hers.

She was going to live again.

It had been hard to learn how to take what Rachel had. In the beginning Dinah hadn't known what to do, even after the urge and the anger gave her power to find Rachel and know who she was.

The trouble had been lack of strength, with only a weak ability to reach and probe. Lying unembodied and helpless in the world she'd quitted after crossing the bridge of her urge and hatred, Dinah had had to find the places of her own strength; the places where Rachel weakened and Dinah became strong and dominant.

But this knowledge had built up out of Dinah's own yearning substance and now triumph was close. In each place Dinah had frequented and loved in her living world, there was greater strength and greater weakening of Rachel.

Twice, Dinah had taken from Rachel that to which she was entitled, but both times her strength to hold on had not been great enough.

Once it had been far from the Blue Cottage where Dinah and Mother had lived and where Dinah's greatest strength was to be found.

It had been far away in the world-space, but Rachel had suddenly weakened, gone completely dormant and empty and Dinah had moved in.

Then Rachel had fought and someone had helped her and Dinah had been forced out. Again this happened, in the same place and again Rachel was helped.

But Rachel had come closer to the heart of Dinah's power and Dinah was able to order and direct and Rachel was not strong enough to disobey. Dinah had tested her own strength and found it very powerful. She'd commanded Rachel from the house and up into the old playroom in the barn. From there, Rachel was putty and went swiftly to the Blue Cottage, where Dinah took her body away from her and lived in it for a precious moment.

But a last surge of power had come from somewhere to help Rachel push Dinah out.

A last surge.

There would not be another, because now, Rachel had no strength left and Dinah

would command her again to cross the forest and enter the Blue Cottage.

Then Dinah would live again and Rachel would be destroyed.

With a new surge of strength, Dinah greatened her rage, broke the last ties to the gray place between the worlds, and hovered free over the Blue Cottage.

Waiting . . .

"I think you're doing a terrible thing," Penny said.

"We're dealing with a terrible force," Logan replied.

It was early evening. The sun had not yet set. Logan had just come down from looking in on Rachel, who was still asleep, and had joined Penny and Dane on the front porch.

Penny said, "Be that as it may, something's plaguing the girl and it plagues her worse here than anywhere else."

"True, but there's another side to it. The abnormality has enough malignancy to destroy her wherever we go but in other places it becomes elusive. Here it assumes clearer form and gives us a chance to cope with it."

"Then why aren't you coping?"

"I'm doing my best. It wasn't in my plans that Rachel elude me and escape to the Blue Cottage. You can charge one against me for that. But now I'm going to do my best to help Rachel through the coming battle."

Dane's deep eyes flickered. "The coming battle?"

"There has to be a crisis. It's a law of nature that these things go one way or another."

Penny was knitting furiously on a black wool sock. She said, "But how can you help the child when you don't know what's wrong with her?"

"I know."

Penny dropped a stitch, caught it up skilfully, and looked at Logan, her mouth prim and disapproving. "Then why don't you tell us?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't believe me, for one thing."

"You might try us."

"All right. I think Rachel is possessed."

"What on earth are you talking about? Possessed by what?"

"Not completely, as yet, but some entity is attacking her from the unknown—from the invisible."

Penny's eyes snapped. "Why I never heard anything so idiotic in my life."

"You're not alone in rejec-

tion. There are many people who think possession, dual personality and such, are crackpot ideas of men who try to frighten their patients or are at a loss for logical explanations of mental illness. I'll grant you that we who believe in such things haven't much in the way of tangible proof to offer. But on the other hand, we aren't witch doctors and haven't given in to the world of superstition."

"Superstition is exactly what it sounds like. Old wives' tales. Did it ever occur to you that what Rachel might need is an old-fashioned spanking?"

Logan smiled. "You can be sure that if I thought it would help, I'd be out making a paddle right now."

"Too much mamby-pamby in this modern age if you ask me. Some of the old-fashioned ideas were good. There wasn't any juvenile delinquency in my day," and Penny was off on some homespun philosophy.

Logan didn't answer immediately. It seemed to him that Penny's own convictions were not behind her words. He felt she was using this tack to produce an end. She wanted Rachel to leave Marchwood, thought perhaps this was the way to accomplish it. And if this was true, her reasons were something other than Rachel's welfare.

Penny wanted the past to remain undisturbed. She wanted the tragedies of the Blue Cottage left below the crust of the years.

"There may be something in what you say," Logan told her. He intended to hold his ground and allowing himself to get into an argument with Penny March wasn't the way to do it. He glanced at Dane March and tried to read his eyes; to see what lay behind that almost-hostile face.

But Dane March was a hard man to read . . .

Inside the house, Rachel March sat up in bed and smiled. She'd been awake when Doctor Logan looked in but she'd lain very quiet and waited for him to leave.

After he closed the door, she lay still for a while, enjoying the sense of power that filled her mind and her body. There was nothing to be afraid of. Life was wonderful and it hadn't been created for the fearful—the timid. Life was a thing to go out and take and right at this moment the heart and soul of life was centered at the Blue Cottage.

She had to go to the Blue Cottage. She had to go now.

She couldn't wait. The power was a voice urging her, calling her out of the house, into the lowering sun, and into the velvet night that would follow.

There was little time.

With a craftiness born of the new power, she slipped from the bedroom and down the backstairs. No one was in sight and she vanished into the forest and was soon running up the old road among the whispering trees . . .

The sun went down over the forest rim and Dane March stared into its rosy afterglow. He was scarcely aware of what Penny and Logan were saying. He knew Penny was upset and was trying to get Logan to take Rachel away, but deep in Dane's mind was a feeling that it was too late; that fate, like a slow-moving glacier was pushing forward and that no force on earth could keep it from uncovering the old bones.

Penny was in the midst of a particularly heated declaration, so neither she nor Logan took notice as Dane got to his feet and left the porch.

He walked out across the lawn. Dane did the best he could at keeping the place up but the lawn had a shaggy look about it; the look of a man who needed a haircut or a horse that needed clipping.

But it had not always been thus, and Dane's mind and memory hearkened back to his younger years; when his father had still lived and with three sons, kept Marchwood in dress-parade splendor at all times.

After the old gentleman died, things went on pretty much as before. Even after the three of them were married, Marchwood's appearance was still a matter of importance.

Will went away to build a career for himself and Tom wasn't of much help with his wildness and happy-go-lucky attitude about life in general. But Dane had been young and strong and Penny had been the kind of girl who appreciated steadiness in a man and they'd made things work; kept Marchwood a place to be proud of.

Dane's mind came back to the time and the place long enough to note that another storm was brewing; that the sky still had not vented all its wrath and would again lash the earth with its fury.

Then he returned to the earlier years, went back and faced squarely up to the memory he had been trying to avoid all the day.

Joan March.

And now he saw again as he'd seen her that first day Tom brought her home. She'd worn a light, feathery dress and as she stepped down out of the buggy, the smooth, warm expanse of an inner leg and thigh flashed into his vision and sent a wave of hot blood pounding through him.

And she had known. That, to him, had been the strange part; because with her trim high-heeled feet on the ground, her slim legs vanishing under her dress at the knees, she'd turned slowly and looked straight into his eyes and said, "Dane March. Hello. I'm deliriously happy to be here."

But that wasn't what she'd said silently, in thoughts he'd understood as clearly as if they'd been shouted out in words.

With her thoughts, she'd said, *You want me, Dane March. Not as a sister-in-law, but as a lover. You want to take me in your arms and feel my body on yours and my mouth on yours. I want you, too, and both of us will always know it.*

He'd turned away quickly, ashamed of himself; lusting after his brother's wife the first moment he saw her.

Joan had made him miserable after that. Subtly, expertly, she'd teased and taunted him and he'd wondered if she did it only for her own amusement, for the bolstering of her own confidence in herself as a woman, or whether she would actually have violated her marriage vows with a little encouragement from her husband's brother.

He never found out because he never gave her that encouragement. He was a March and the will of a March wasn't to be bent by woman however beautiful even if she boiled his blood in his veins. He could have stood out against her forever.

But Tom was killed and Joan was left alone. Even then, Dane had avoided her until one evening he went to the Blue Cottage to ask about her plans. She certainly wasn't going to stay there alone . . .

"But I am. And I won't be alone. I'll have you."

"That's crazy. You're out of your mind!"

"Am I?"

Joan was in a dressing gown and as she turned toward him the belt came undone and there was only the flimsiest of nightgowns under it. She came close and pressed

against him and he would have had to be made of stone.

"I love you, Dane. I don't know whether you love me or not but you want me and that's good enough for a while, because I want you so badly I wake up in the night reaching for you."

"Joan! No! in the heaven's name—!"

She laughed softly into his shoulder. "I could never have had you with Tom alive, but now he's dead and I'm sorry because I loved him too."

"And yet—"

"Why should I die because he died? And Penny? All right. We won't tell Penny. Not until you're ready. But you will be ready. I'm going to take you away from her. I'll be satisfied with a part of you for a while, but eventually, I want all of you. And I'll get all of you."

He hadn't been able, then, to resist Joan. She became a drug, saturating his mind, creating a demand for herself in his body that had to be satisfied.

He tried to stay away from her but when the demand got unbearable, he would sneak to the Blue Cottage like a skulking thief and take her as a thirsting man would take water.

And Joan, always waiting for him with tender caresses and knowing smiles; letting him go when he had satisfied himself and left cursing his own weakness because she knew he would be back; knew he would come back again and again until he was ready to stay for good . . .

Then had come the night of his last visit to the Blue Cottage. He'd fought himself for a long time even after the need for Joan had become unendurable. He had quarreled with Penny, an unheard of thing, so sharp was his gnawing need, and had then gone off into the woods to fight with himself anew.

But it had been of little use and late in the night, even filled with rage at his own weakness, he'd rushed through the forest toward the Blue Cottage . . .

Dane March shivered as a cool night breeze washed in from the forest and brushed across his face. The sun had lowered but there was a moon to throw a pale radiance over Marchwood.

He sighed deeply and felt very old and deeply weary. A secret carried for so many silent years could age a man and bow him down.

He turned from where he'd been standing and walked

slowly back toward the house wondering about youth and passions and the follies of humankind.

Joan March had been a hot, demanding, vital thing in his arms, but now she was quiet dust in a forgotten grave. His need for her had been an appetite that cried through his blood to be satisfied, but now he was an old man and the forces that had driven him into wrong-doing had long-since left his flesh and blood; their urgency so long-forgotten and alien to his mind that he could look back on it now as only the wildest kind of madness.

Lust worn away by age. Passion turned into vapor, dispersed into nothing by the winds of a thousand hot summer nights.

But the guilt lived on, increasing in weight and age weakened his body.

He was on the porch now, and as he reached for the door knob it was pulled away from his hand and Logan stood there with Penny close behind him.

"Rachel is gone. She isn't in her room."

"She slipped out of the house while we were talking."

Logan had a flashlight in his hand. "You've got to show me the way to the Blue Cottage. We've got to hurry. It may be too late even now. . ."

They had reached the edge of the forest before Dane realized Penny was with them. "Go back. There's nothing you can do to help and the way is too rough."

"I'm going. I may be needed."

Dane seemed inclined to press the argument, but then he turned away, cutting the darkness with his flashlight, Logan and Penny following along behind.

There was a bright moon, but it was of little help, the overhanging trees turning the roadway into a dark tunnel.

But the distance was finally covered—in complete silence as the three of them labored with the high grass and the brambles. Then they came out into the open glade with the Blue Cottage standing desolate and forlorn in the clear light of a lemon moon. Empty and forlorn, but not deserted. Penny raised a hand to her face; a gesture of protest, a reaction to horror, and cried out at the thing that stood glaring at them in the open yard.

It was Rachel.

But was it? It was not the Rachel they knew. The face had changed as completely as

rage and hatred and uncontrolled savagery could change human flesh. Half the clothing had been torn from the body. The result was not obscenity of the flesh but rather a grotesque changing of a woman's body into that of a child. The woman's flesh was there but the overall effect was one of adolescent gauntness, a child wearing the body of a women and not knowing how to use it.

The thing that was no longer Rachel laughed and their blood chilled at the sound. Then horror mounted at the words that spewed forth in the screaming hysterical voice of a child. "I won! I got what's mine. I've come back!"

"God in heaven, it's Dinah! Penny moaned. "What heathen's working is this? God in heaven, it can't be true!"

She stood frozen as the long-forgotten voice of Dinah March spewed out vindictiveness. "You rotten hypocrites! You dirty, filthy, sanctimonious scum. Both of you acting like saints when you're nothing but stuff for the devil."

Dinah had picked up a fallen fence stave and was advancing on the trio with her baleful animal eyes burning into Penny's. While both Penny and Dane stood frozen, Logan moved in on her. She stood at bay, crouching there for a moment, then turned to run.

"I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you. You can't stop me!"

Logan ran forward and lunged and got his hands on her. Sharp teeth bit into his arm and they struggled, moving into the trees and it took him several minutes to subdue her completely. Then when he had her arms locked tight and had maneuvered her into a position where neither her teeth nor her flailing feet were effective, Penny and Dane March came forward.

Penny moved close and looked into terrible eyes. "What do you want? Why did you come back?"

"I want to live! I've got a right to live—more than you because you killed. You killed my mother and then you killed me. You murdered us and then went back to live your life as though nothing had happened."

Penny was stunned. She stood swaying, there in the dappled moonlight, her eyes staring but not seeing. And when she spoke it was as though to herself. "I talked to her. I asked her to go away. Then I warned her, but she

wouldn't go. She said she would take Dane away from me and when I came here that night I didn't come to kill her but I wasn't quite right in my mind for a little while. I slapped her, that was all—slapped her and I don't know what happened after that, but then she was crying and running and I was running after her and she went over the cliff."

Penny swayed. Dane took a step forward but she held up a hand fending him off and he stopped.

"Yes, I killed her, but I didn't kill you. I was standing by the cliff wanting to do something and you screamed like a mad devil and came at me. I guess you had a right to do that. I'd killed your mother. But I didn't kill you. I only stepped aside, and even as you went over the cliff I tried to reach you. I tried, but it was too late."

Dinah struggled in Logan's grip. "You killer! You filthy murderer. I've come back! I've come back!"

"What do you want? My life? Is that what you came after? Will you go back to the hell you came from if I give you my life? All right. You can have it. I place no value on it. No value. I haven't lived since that night. I've only existed and I'm glad to go."

Even Dane, closer to her than Logan could not possibly have reached her in time. She turned and took four swift steps and vanished over the cliff.

She made no outcry as she fell and before Dane or Logan could move, the sick, crunching sound came up from the rocks below, even above the angry boiling of Fury Creek. It was a frozen picture as the moon looked down through the trees.

Then Dinah laughed. It wasn't a laugh so much as an inarticulate devil's sound of mad glee and it brought Dane out of his daze.

He walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down. With a weariness of age, he turned to the left and vanished down what was evidently a pathway. Logan saw his light bobbing below cliff level and then it went out. There were sounds of scraping footsteps and he reappeared carrying Penny's body. He came over and stood before the place where Logan was still holding the raging demon that had taken possession of Rachel's mind and body.

"She's dead." Dane said dully.

"I'm glad. And you should be dead too. You were here that night. You saw her kill Mother. You let her do it!"

Dane March didn't seem surprised by the accusation. "Yes, I was here but I couldn't stop it. It happened too fast. Then when it was over, what was there to do? Accuse my own wife of murder."

"Hypocrite!"

"I guess you're right. It was because of me that Penny killed Joan. But I'm not going to die to oblige you."

Logan intervened. "We've got to get them back to the house. You carry Penny's body. I think I can force this one to go along."

"Not yet."

Dane turned away, not quite so wearily this time but still calmly and quietly and with the decisiveness of a man with something to do.

He went to the Blue Cottage and Logan saw him moving around in the moonlight. Then he knelt down and a few moments later a flame bloomed up against the wall of the house.

Dane March stood back and watched and very soon the dry wood was a blazing torch. Then he turned and came back to where Logan had pushed the struggling Dinah out of the wooded fringe back into the overgrown front yard.

"Give her to me."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"Burn her to death."

The words were chilling in their quiet grimness. Logan said, "Have you gone out of your mind. too?"

"She must die by fire."

Dinah screamed out in rage and terror and as she struggled, Logan was brought around within Dane's reach. Dane braced himself and swung his huge right fist. It thudded against the side of Logan's head and his body went limp.

In the same motion, Dane took Dinah by one arm and then drew her, struggling, into his grip. He handled her silently, almost sadly, like a doll and holding her at arm's length he moved toward the roaring furnace that had once been the Blue Cottage.

The heat bellied out and he stopped just within its perimeter to look quietly up into the sky and say, "The storm will come and put it out. The woods will not burn. God provides."

Dinah shrieked in terror. Dane stood quietly, holding her toward the fire. "Please!

Have mercy! Have Mercy! I've wanted to live. I've waited so long!"

"Even coming back from the dead, you fear the pain and agony of death — even knowing what lies beyond you still are afraid of torture."

"In God's name—"

"I'm going to throw you into the flames. Maybe they will burn you clean before you die. Maybe it will be hard to kill you. They say in the old days, witches died very hard and you're made of more evil stuff than they were. But you must burn."

"No—no!"

"I'll throw you in and make you stay. If you try to crawl out, I'll kick you back in again until you're nothing but a lump of burned and roasted flesh."

Dinah's terrified shrieks echoed through the dark forest. Then, as Dane braced his feet and raised the stolen body over his head, there was a whimper, and it went limp in his great hands . . .

John Logan came to, struggled up on his hands and knees and shook his head groggily. He felt as though he'd been hit by an anvil hurled from the hand of a giant.

As consciousness became clearer, he realized he must have been out for a long time. It had rained and then stopped raining and he'd been drenched and dirtied by the mud in which he'd lain.

The Blue Cottage was a smouldering ruin; a few charred and smoking beams pointing starkly up at the lowering moon. The air was a strange mixture of after-rain cleanness and the unpleasant smell of the burning from the cottage.

Logan got to his feet and conquered his dizziness. He looked around. There was no one in sight. He called out. No one answered. He found his flashlight and started back toward Marchwood Manor. . .

He found Dane March sitting on a lawn chair in the moonlight with his arm around Rachel March. There was a blanket around her shoulders and her head was on his shoulder.

He looked huge and mysterious sitting there, his face cadaverous in the shadows.

Dane said, "Penny inside—on her bed—on the bed she slept on since the first day we were married."

"I'm very sorry," Logan said.

Logan leaned close to Rachel and laid a hand

against her cheek. Dane said, "She's all right. Everything is over for her now. The evil is gone. She'll remember a little and there will be some nightmares, but she'll be all right."

"The thing that possessed her was—"

"Her sister, Dinah. We New Englanders are not without knowledge of such things. My ancestors walked this country when they were burning witches up in Salem. The knowing ones say it was all fraud and a lot of it was. Men are still open to fear and superstition, but there have been possessions before and they will come again. As long as there are rare spirits with a fierce love of life and a rebellion against the great laws of life and death."

"What happened? Did you burn the Blue Cottage?"

"Yes. For two reasons. It was Dinah's anchor in this world. She harbored all her strength there. For that reason and for a funeral pyre if it had to be that way."

"A funeral pyre?"

"There is a thing about unholy possessors. Even though they've known death, they must take what comes to the body they steal and they are still vulnerable to human agony. The threat of death by fire drove Dinah from the body she'd captured."

"And Rachel returned?"

"She could do nothing else. She had not yet gone through death. She could only return to her body after Dinah left it and luckily Dinah was frightened out before I threw the body into the fire."

"You'd have thrown it—regardless?"

Dane nodded his great head. "It was the only way. Better that Rachel die in clean fire than wander on the wind, neither alive or dead."

Logan said, "I feel ashamed, somehow. I was supposed to be the doctor—parading my knowledge. Yet you're the one who really knew."

"You did well, but there are things the old ones know. We who are close to death learn of its mysteries and I am very close to it. I will not be here long. Penny is waiting."

They sat quiet for a while and then Dane said, "I'd like to keep Rachel here for a little while. It will be good for her and she will be a comfort to me."

"You're the doctor," Logan said quietly.

THE END

BLURBLE

By M. G. ZIMMERMAN

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Great oaks from little acorns grow. But who knows what is likely to sprout from an alien seed merchandised by a hot-shot adman?

JOE WEIDERMEYER'S car shot past the billboard.

"Blurble?"

"Now what the hell is Blurble?" wondered Joe as he eased up on the accelerator. Advertising interested him; he was a vice-president, one of twenty-four in the firm of MILKBERRY, MOTZART, & MILTONE. His position was precarious, as are all vice-presidents in advertising firms, and in the past thirteen weeks, Joe, having been elevated to this new and high position, lived, loved, and liked anything, everything, or anyone who was distantly related to advertising in any form, shape, or manner, whatsoever.

So Joe signalled a u-turn and headed back the way he had just come. Executing another u-turn brought him face to face with the almost empty billboard.

Blurble. it radiated in multicolored, knee-high letters. Nothing else, just—**Blurble.**

"I knew it," sighed Joe, fatalistically.

He was thinking of Hank Singer, also a vice-president and the most dangerous rival for not only the chief executive spot but for Molly as well, a thorn on both counts.

"Score one for Hanky boy," he said to himself. This gimmick was a honey. How Hank had clevered it out was beyond Joe's comprehensible powers. It was a lulu; Joe had to admit that, but not without painful twinges of jealousy assailing

the most vulnerable part of his make-up, his ego.

Visions of Hank jubilantly being called into the Big Man's Domain, patted on the back, and becoming V. P. number I filled Joe's mind.

"Ugh," he shuddered, reverting to primeval speech. He studied the billboard once more, going over it with a practiced eye, searching for defects, any defects. There were none.

"Maybe I've been spending too much time with Molly," decided Joe. "But now is the time for action."

With wheels of determination clicking around inside his brain, Joe started the car and drove at a mad pace toward the office. He was thinking up a gimmick to surpass this coup d'êtat that Hank had so skillfully weaved. But his brain wasn't functioning properly and his mind was pathetically blank when he reached the office door.

"Well," he reasoned philosophically, "I'll just have to brazen it out." He shrugged, donned his most smug look of supercilious contempt, usually reserved for special occasions and subordinates, and shouldered his way inside.



"Good morning all."

Joe bowed low, hiding his

face from all present. On his way down he noticed the glum look spread across Hank's countenance. Joe stopped before his sacroilliac locked on him, last resort to emerge from a ticklish situation without losing face.

He straightened up again with some difficulty. Joe tucked away a mental note to partake of more outdoor exercises.

He loosed his most dazzling smile in the direction of his arch-rival, and with a cheery flick of his well-groomed above-shoulders, shot him a happy hello and my aren't you down to the slave-shop early?

Joe wasn't positive, but the reply that faintly reached his ears resembled a term he had never heard from human lips other than his own.

"Dib you say—Blurble?" asked Joe.

Hank stood up. The grin on his face was certainly a sick one. He nodded unhappily.

"That's what I said. Blurble."

Hank sat down again. Joe wondered how he had stood up in the first place. Hank looked sick.

"Hey! What's wrong with you? Why aren't you leering at me the way you always do when you've done something sneaky and stinky behind my back?" demanded Joe, slightly perturbed by Hank's strange behavior.

Hank threw him a weak, defiant glance that was meant to explain it all. It didn't, and Joe stood there, straight and tall, kingly, as if patiently waiting for a frightened serf to explain why he had resisted the King's Guard while they burned his barn for sport.

"Haven't you got it backwards?" Hank finally spoke up. "Blurble is *your* something sneaky and stinky behind *my* back, isn't it?" demanded Hank, slightly perturbed by Joe's strange behavior.

"You mean—, Blurble isn't yours?" stammered Joe, at a loss for words.

"No," replied Hank. "I thought it was yours!"

Sadly, Joe shook his head. "Nein."

Sadly, Hank shook his head. "Nein."

He managed another of his sickly grins. "Well, looks like a dark horse. What V. P. did we underestimate, I wonder?"

Joe's hands shot over his head, palms-upward. "Who knows? Who wants to know?"

Once again visions of some enterprising, bright young man in the Big Boy's Domain, patted on the back, smoking B.B.'s Havana-tampas, floated

around in Joe's mind; only this time the veep's face was blank.

"Hank," he started.

"Yes, I know. We're thinking the same thing." He lapsed into moody silence.

"Well, B.B. won't be in for some time yet. That leaves us time enough to get a good start. Shall we remove our carcasses from here and drop them at the nearest pickling factory?" Hank threw a brotherly arm around Joe's shoulder.

Surprisingly, Joe found he didn't mind. Maybe Hank wasn't such a heel after all. He threw a brotherly arm around Hank's shoulder and refrained from shedding a comradely tear.

"Let's," he sniffled.

A few good, stiff shots were in order. The Big Man would be speaking to them shortly.

Joe paused at the door long enough to turn and announce dramatically, "Ars longa, vita brevis!" With this, he turned on his heels and quickly strode after Hank, visions of whiskey sours spurring him on to better than average speed. He caught up with Hank and once again they threw their arms around each other's shoulders.

In the hallway they met Molly Breenan. Both Hank and Joe had decided against her last name; Breenan was to be banished, replaced by either Singer or Weidermeyer. Molly Singer. Molly Weidermeyer. which sounded more chic, sophisticated? Unhappily, Joe had had to concede to Hank on that point. Molly Singer did have a nice ring to it.

With arms still locked around shoulders in an attitude of brotherly love, both men bowed as low as circumstances permitted.

Molly looked on, mollified. Never had she seen these two men in such a state of friendliness. Their rivalry had spread beyond the portals of MILKBERRY, MOTZART, & MILTONE to other firms, and their battle for position and Molly was fast becoming legend in the advertising world.

"What's happened?" Molly feared the worst.

"Ah," sighed Joe dramatically. "Hank is a good fellow. He had offered alcoholic contentment to this unworthy peon," Joe pointed a long finger at himself, "who accepts with humble gratitude. If not stretching the invitation, would you care to partake of imbibement for a short, but captivating moment before B.B. makes a tour of his little Domain?"

"What's he ulcerizing now? I thought that after today one

of you two would be First V.P. What's happened?"

Hank pursed his lips. "We have failed. Some young vice-president, callously, ambitiously, cut our throats. No doubt you have observed certain billboards today?"

"You mean to say that Blurble isn't yours? But I thought —I mean, that is . . ." Molly gave up and let her voice trail off into silence.

"Correct," chimed in Joe. "Blurble is not our idea, combined or separately. We have been ousted."

A slight silence followed while all three envisioned the events that were sure to follow. B.B. would order a carton of tranquilizers, the V.P. scene would shift turbulently, men would be hired, personnel would be fired. All positions would be unstable.

Molly squirmed in between the two men and led them back toward the office. "You're going to need all your faculties this morning, and not hampered by alcoholic hiccups. Come on."

The two men nodded unhappily. She was right. Molly was always right. They allowed her to drag them reluctantly into the inner domains of the Big Boy's little dictatorship.

"Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate," quoted Joe, wondering if Dante had been correct, as the door closed behind him.

"Oh, do be quiet," commanded Molly, exasperated. "You've troubles enough as is. Why can't you be more like Hank?"

Hank stood silently, head bowed; the perfect picture of a little child expecting a slight punishment from an understanding parent for a little breech of justice.

Joe felt disgust well up inside him. Hank had his way of approaching the Big Man, Joe had his highways of progression, and never the two shall cross, he promised himself.

His later New Year's resolution was interrupted by a silky smooth voice from the intercom system.

"Joe, Hank, would you please drop into my office when you find time?"

Joe knew that question was the same as an order. He and Hank had time to see the Boss, even if they were buried under a stack of work that had been classified as urgent.

"Good luck and best wishes for a speedy recovery," whispered Molly as the two men made their way across the floor to the door leading into the inner sanctum.

Inside Joe found himself

ushered into a soft, plush chair, a drink thrust into one hand, a cigar into the other. He glanced at Hank who was being given the same treatment.

"If this means termination, it's the nicest way I've ever been fired," said Joe to himself as he lighted his cigar.

The Boss moved around behind his desk and plopped into an overstuffed swivel-chair.

"Well," he chortled. "Well, I'm glad to see my two best vice-presidents are at ease. Are taking it easy. Are enjoying their tea-time."

Joe had no idea what to expect. Obviously, they weren't getting the boot. Joe wondered what sinister plan was being formulated behind those dignified wrinkles covering B.B.'s forehead.

"I suppose you gentlemen are curious as to why I've called you in here. Well, I'll be blunt. Gentlemen, some rival firm had won the day. Has frosted the cake. Has sugared the tea."

He leaned over the desk, peering at the two men through his horn-rimmed glasses which Joe knew were only props. The Boss had better eyesight than Joe.

"Blurble."

Hank choked on a sip of his Pernod. Joe choked on a drag of his Havana-tampa. The Boss just choked.

Pulling a handkerchief from his breast pocket, he slipped the corner of it under his glasses and lightly dabbed at his eyes.

"Yes, some other firm has beaten us to the punch. Has won the race. Has taken the spoils. I'm sure that both of you are aware of the new advertising campaign to promote the sale of Blurble, whatever this may be. Since it is a product handled by some other firm, I'm not holding you responsible. After all, you can't very well be held for a crime you didn't commit. A lie you didn't tell. Fraud you didn't perpetuate."

The tone belied the words. Joe knew the Big Man would prosecute them if he didn't already have some scheme that involved them. He waited for the proposition he knew would soon be forthcoming.

"It is well known to me that you and Hank have aspired to higher planes of executive advancement. I've had my eye on the two of you for some time now, and just to be truthful, I can't decide which one of you would fill the shoes of Kingderry with the most promise."

Kingderry had been B.B.'s right hand man and V.P. num-

ber I. Unfortunately, he was too ambitious, and the Big Man had seen fit to have him removed. Kingderry was now serving eighteen years at San Quentin for fraud.

"So," continued the Boss, "I have decided to V.P. upper-echelon whichever of you brings me the Blurble account first. Go out and get the gravy. Retrieve the standard. Bring home the bacon!"

Joe wished the Big Boy would stop using those horrible, outdated colloquialisms. It was impossible to concentrate under the mental hailstorm created by the antiquated verbalisms.

With an airy wave of his well-groomed paw, the Boss dismissed the two young men who left via the same entrance they had entered by.

Molly met them at the door.

"Well, what happened?" she asked.

"Blurble . . ." muttered Hank, staring off into space.

"Blurble . . ." murmured Joe, gazing at nothingness.

Both men dashed for the door. Hank was in better shape and won the sprint by several feet.

Breathing heavily, Joe glared with Neanderthal hostility toward his once-again foe.

"Firstest with the mostest," sang out Hank, broadly beaming.

"The tortoise won the race," gasped Joe, overflowing with Indian stoicism.

Hank sprang lightly through the door and bounced down the stairs.

Joe decided to wait for the elevator. He was very much out of condition.

"Brains, not brawn, wins every race in this civilized world," he mumbled as he boarded the elevator and dropped from sight.

Back in the office Molly eased onto a desk-top, shaking her head. She wondered what the Big Man had said. However, she didn't worry. No matter who came out on top, she would be sitting next to him. She hoped it would be Hank. Singer was such a nice name.

Joe spent the day looking at Blurble advertisements on billboards, in the newspapers, plastered on fences; listening to Blurble spot commercials on TV, radio (both AM and FM), and not getting anywhere at all.

He was baffled. Joe had no idea after a full day's search as to what Blurble was or where Blurble came from. He was sure of one thing only.

All of the Blurble commer-

cials followed the same pattern. None of the advertisements explained what Blurble was; they only enticed buyers into buying.

It was a well-planned, cleverly-executed campaign. Joe had never seen one similar to it. Sadly, he had to admit to himself that whoever was promoting this enterprise was a genius head and shoulders above any other.

City lights were flickering on when Joe decided to give up for the day and return home. He had to admit defeat for the time being, but tomorrow would bring a different story, he hoped.

Hank and Molly were waiting for him when he arrived at his home.

Blushing, Molly re-arranged her hair while Hank unsuccessfully attempted to remove little red smears on and about his lips.

"Good evening," he said cheerfully.

Joe found himself casting about for a club so he would stand an equal chance with Hank. He didn't mind Hank mussing Molly, or even stealing into his house, but to have the gall to open and drink Joe's 200 year old brandy was a sin that Joe would never forgive.

"No doubt you are here to bring me bad tidings," stalled Joe, still looking for a blunt instrument.

"No doubt," cleverly retorted Hank.

Molly stood up. Smiling her sweetest smile, she angelically put her hands together.

"Hank and I are going to be married."

"Oh," said Joe, absently. "That's nice."

He was staring at the small package Hank dangled in front of him.

"Blurble?"

"Blurble."

"I thought so," sighed Joe. "What is it?"

"Seeds."

Joe squinted at the brown sack. "Seeds?"

"Yes, seeds. The manufacturer is carrying his own advertisement, and they won't have anything to do with other advertising firms here or abroad."

Joe shrugged. "Well, if that's the case, then how do you know . . ."

"Except under certain conditions," interrupted Hank. "And I've already agreed to them and signed them up. It's all settled."

He refilled his brandy glass. "Tough luck, old man, but the brightest light shines the most. The oak is taller than

the elm. The eagle flies higher than the sparrow."

Hank was beginning to sound like B.B.

Joe walked over to Molly and lightly brushed her hair with his lips.

"You win."

Molly smiled sweetly again. "I knew I would."

Joe turned to Hank. "Now, just what grows from a Blurble seed?"

Hank waggled his finger. "Tch, tch. That's one of the restrictions. No one knows, except the manufacturer, and he's not telling!"

"But that's ridiculous!" snorted Joe. "Who's going to buy something when they don't even know what it is?" Somehow, that sentence seemed stilted to Joe. He decided he needed a drink. Joe opened the liquor cabinet and removed a pony glass. He wanted some of his own precious brandy which was disappearing at an alarming rate.

"Not only that," pouted Molly, "but they won't sell the seeds to females. A man has to sign a contract to get seeds. No female gets a seed."

"What?" exclaimed Joe. He filled his small container from the brandy-bottle and slowly rotated it between his palms. If nothing else, he knew how to drink good brandy. Balefully, he watched Hank chug-a-lug a good two ounces.

"That's right," said Hank, gulping. "Man, is that good brandy." He stared at the empty glass in his hand and then reached for the bottle. "I know the restrictions sound a little silly, but it was the only way I could sign them up—and you know what B.B. said."

"Oh well," shrugged Joe. "I know of a good janitorial job over on the east side."

"Nonsense," waved Hank. "I'm going to need good men working under me. You've got a job as long as you want it."

The thought of working under Hank spoiled the good taste of the brandy as it flowed into Joe's stomach.

Joe picked up the sack of Blurble seeds. "No thanks, Hank. I've got some money saved up. I'd rather resign quietly."

"It's up to you."

"There is one thing I'd like you to do for me, though," added Joe.

"Name it, and if it can be done, I'll do it."

"I want this sack."

"It's yours."

"Thanks."

Hank rose. "Now, if you don't mind, Molly and I will be on our way."

"No," said Joe absently, "I don't mind." He studied the brown sack.

Hank and Molly found their way out. After they had left, Joe opened the sack and dumped the contents onto the table.

One seed. One small, gnarled, lumpish-looking seed. Joe picked it up and tenderly carried it outside. He planted it in the darkness and returned inside. He was curious and wanted to see just what Blurble was. He would wait. He had time.

The next day Joe overslept for the first time in thirteen weeks. He opened his eyes and watched the bright sunlight pour into his room through the half-shut venetian blinds.

Fifteen minutes later he was sipping coffee at the breakfast table. Opening the newspaper, he began to read. His eyes locked on the headlines:

Blurble Craze Hits Nation Overnight

Blurble, a new product in the form of a seed, has become the nation's newest fad. No one knows what a Blurble seed is, but everyone—male, that is—has bought one. One is all the company will sell to an individual. Who knows what Blurble is? The only answer is simply to plant your seed and wait along with other curious males.

Joe flipped on the radio and searched for news. He found it. A well-known commentator spoke for ten minutes on Blurble and its effect on the world. Having more up to date reports, he stated that Blurble seeds were not confined just to this country, but had been promoted throughout the entire world. He said that never had any one product been distributed over such a wide area so quickly. He guessed that by tomorrow noon every male in the world would have a Blurble seed planted, if sales kept on as they were.

Joe stood up and walked over to the window. He looked into the backyard and dropped the newspaper.

The Blurble seed had sprouted. Overnight it had grown at least four feet high. But it wasn't the rate of growth that had caused Joe to drop the newspaper, it was the shape the stalk had taken.

A woman. A beautiful, green woman. Perfectly proportioned and four feet high.

For fifteen minutes Joe stood transfixed at the window before he realized he could walk into the yard.

Outside, he wandered around the plant, staring in-

tently at it. Finally, he gathered up enough courage to reach out and touch it.

The skin of the plant felt surprisingly like Molly. Joe shook his head. The plant seemed too real. He had to find out more about it.

Dashing inside, he grabbed the phone and quickly dialed Hank's number. He answered after ten long rings.

"Who the hell's calling? I'm busy!"

"Hank! It's your old buddy-buddy, Joe!"

"Oh, hello Joe."

"Listen Hank, I've got to know more about this Blurble plant!"

"Umm, you've already planted yours?"

"Yes! Oh my God, Yes!" Joe cradled the phone close. "Tell me, what do you do with the plant?"

"Well," Hank was speaking with a certain degree of detachment, "so far all I know is what the circulars say. The plant will mature tomorrow. All the plants will mature at the same time—that's what I learned from the manufacturer."

Excitedly, Joe hopped around.

"But what happens when the plant matures?" he shouted into the receiver.

"—take shears and snip the stalk just below the feet. She'll open her eyes, that's how'll you'll know it's time." Hank's voice became more and more detached. "These fellows sure know how to run an advertising campaign. Really know their stuff."

Joe danced up and down. "You mean she'll be alive and living and warm and—Hot Diggety Damn!" he sang out as he fell to the floor.

"Uh-huh. Now if you'll excuse, Joe, I've got to water my plant." The phone clicked as Hank hung up.

Joe left the phone and ran outside. He wanted to make sure his plant wasn't in need of water.

Joe spent the rest of the day erecting a canvas shelter to protect his Blurble plant from the hot sun, taking time only to water and spade the soil near the base of the stalk.

That night, before he went inside, he wrapped a woolen blanket around his plant to make sure it didn't die while he slept.

He was too excited to sleep, however, and he sat up, thinking how lucky he was to have lost Molly to Hank.

"Some people are lucky, some aren't," he said over and over to himself.

The doorbell buzzed. An-

noyed, Joe walked over to the door and answered it.

Molly flung herself into his arms.

"Oh Joe! I don't know what to do! Hank's left me and quit his job! All because of those nasty Blurble seeds!"

Joe scratched his lower lip with his teeth. *So what,* he thought.

"That's too bad," he said. "Why come to me?"

"You're the only one that can help me." She curled her little finger around his pajama top.

"You could take back your old job with the firm. B.B. nearly died when Hank quit. I'm sure he'd give you the V.P. number I spot if you returned."

Joe shook his head. "No thanks. Come on, I'll show you why!"

He ushered Molly through the house and into the kitchen where he flipped on the porch light.

The Blurble plant stood just inside the fringe of light from the porch.

"I've got one too! I don't need you any more. I've got a beautiful woman, and she's all mine!"

Molly started to speak but couldn't. She turned around and headed for the front door.

"Make sure you pull it shut!" Joe called after her. His only answer was a loud slam.

Joe spent the rest of the night watching his Blurble plant through the kitchen window.

Joe stood silently, snipping shears in his hands. He was waiting for the woman perched on the stalk to open her eyes. He kicked several clods of dirt he had spaded the day before.

The plant opened its eyes. It was time. Joe gulped, and stared at the figure. She was so beautiful, Joe couldn't believe she would really be his. He stood there, then realized he had to cut her down.

Dropping to his knees, he carefully slipped the shears under her feet and clipped the stalk. He jumped up, ready to catch her as she fell.

She did not fall. Instead, the severed stalk disappeared into the ground, leaving the five foot seven female standing barefoot on the soil.

She spread her arms in a graceful motion and took one step forward.

Then she Blurbled.

Calmly, Joe Weidermeyer went insane.

All over the world excited men cut their green women from the stalks and went mad

as the tinted females began to Blurble. By that evening, not one sane male was left in any major city, town, or rurality.

The men who had planned the Blurble campaign shook hands with one another as reports from all over the world flooded their offices.

From every nook and cranny poured forth men with green skins, washed clean of the flesh-colored camouflage they had worn only a short time ago in an unsuspecting world.

They met their green-skinned women and together they happily Blurbled.

The invasion had begun.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Unusual original fantasy themes dominate the important July issue of FANTASTIC.



The powerful Leo Summers cover illustration accompanies **Robert Bloch's** *The Last Plea* which should go down as one of the wildest, wooliest, funniest, most outrageous, and most outspoken social commentaries in the annals of fantasy.

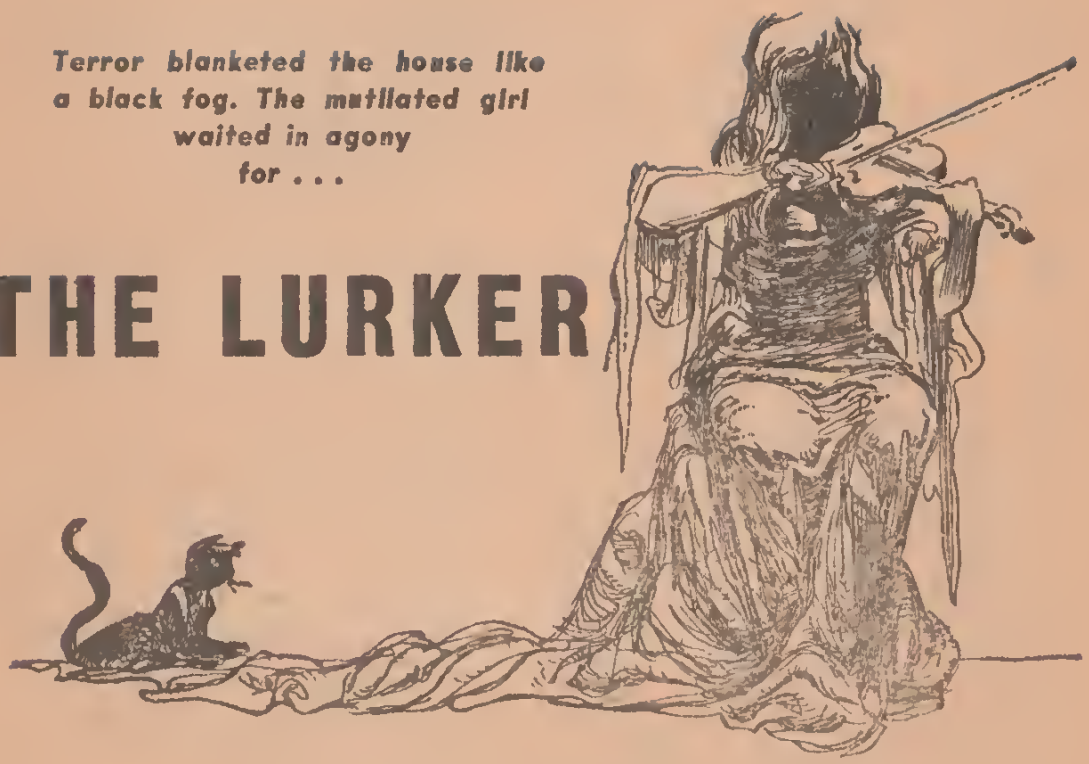
Topping a top-notch list of shorter stories is a **Ray Bradbury** tale which limns a portrait of a space-child's Christmas in *The Gift;* a titillating howler by **Robert F. Young,** whose *40–26–38* forecasts a strange future for buxom blondes; and a chilling story of a gigolo who thoroughly deserved his appalling doom—*Bottle It Up* by **Ron Goulart.**

And as a special bonus, a marvelously stimulating long novelet by **A. Bertram Chandler**—*The Key.*

All these, plus other stories and all our regular features in the July FANTASTIC, on sale at your newsstand June 18. Tell your dealer to reserve a copy for you now.

Terror blanketed the house like a black fog. The mutilated girl waited in agony for . . .

THE LURKER



By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

THE compelling urge to go back to Freemont—to Leona Markham, really — had grown to such proportions that I was forced to obey it. There was no reason to it. No reason, unless I wanted to admit the possibility of telephathy.

But telepathy after fifteen

years? And between a man and woman who had not seen each other since they were children? For two years I had struggled against it — and tried to rationalize it away. Without success.

I had told myself it was a distorted survival of puppy love, all in my mind, and it was true that Leona Markham had been the only thing I missed when, at eleven, my parents moved away from Freemont. I told myself again, now, that that was all it was.

I would see her, meet her husband if she had married, tell her I had "just been passing through town," and go on my way. I comforted myself with that thought as I left the road and entered the woods. It helped to dispel the feeling that Leona Markham had reached out across the bridge of time and space that separated us in a desperate and almost hopeless plea — for help!

I had walked through town from the depot seeing every window in every house brightly lit. From the edge of town to Markham Hill was half a mile of no man's land where houses were dark and deserted. When I reached the bottom of the hill I looked back. Freemont seemed a city under seige, its only weapon of defense Light — brilliant shadowless light. *But defense against what?*

Overhead in the night sky a bloated moon shone down, revealing a remembered path through the woods. Soon even the moon's light was gone, but my feet remembered the way, and the memory of Leona went beside me.

What was she like now? She had been ten then, now she would be twenty-five. A grown woman. It was impossible to think she would be other than beautiful.

Shortly I emerged from the woods at the lower edge of the Markham estate where the private road went through an archway in the stone wall and wound in a graceful curve to the mansion, bisecting the acres of sweeping lawn.

To the right of the curving driveway was the picnic area, where every summer Mr. Markham had invited everybody to come to the annual church picnic. But it was no longer a picnic ground.

Moonlight glinted in reflection from marble headstones that stood in neat rows. Here and there an ornamental tree stood outlined, a silent and motionless sentinel.

A chill went through me as a silent shadow flitted past me

in erratic flight, and for an instant two closely set dots of shining black looked down at me. Then the bat was gone.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I started along the driveway. The sound desecrated the silence. I stepped off onto the edge of the lawn, feeling as guilty as though I had been walking up the aisle in church in squeeky shoes during the moment of silent prayer.

So gradually that I was not aware of it at first, faint music crept into my senses. Even when I became aware of it I was not sure it wasn't my imagination.

It was violin music, but I had never heard anything even vaguely resembling it before. It was not so much music as a thing made of music, like ordinary things are made of atoms. It danced and ran and laughed and wept, and laughed and danced again, and all the time underneath it was lonely and lost, and filled with a yearning hunger. A hunger that drove it a little mad at times. Then it wept, and I could have wept in sympathy.

It seemed at first to come from the cemetery, but as I drew toward the mansion I became sure it originated there. At the foot of the steps going up to the porch that ran the full front of the house I stopped and listened.

Was it Leona playing the violin? If so, she should not be wasting her life here, she should be playing to audiences over the world. I knew little of music, but I knew there had never been such music as this! It was enthralling.

I had to know if it was Leona. I crept silently up the steps and tiptoed to the window the music came through. There were filmy curtains over the window inside, but the girl standing in the center of the room playing the violin was plainly visible through them.

I knew at once it was Leona. She was far more beautiful than I had dreamed. She seemed to be looking right at me. Yet I knew she couldn't see me where I stood in the darkness.

There was something odd in her expression. A suffering, a hopelessness, that somehow did not match the mood of the music she was playing. As I watched, the bow faltered in its vigorous sawing across the strings, and a twinge of pain crossed her expression, and the movement of the bow resumed its mad rhythm.

Suddenly a feeling of horror engulfed me. I may have cried out, but if I did she

didn't hear me. Her left hand—

I had not noticed it until now, or if I did I had thought it a part of the violin itself. It was much the same color, a nut brown. Now my eyes were fixed on it while horror and revulsion dominated me.

Her left hand was shriveled, little more than bones covered with brown parchment. Her wrist and arm almost to the elbow were the same. There could be no life in that hand, yet its fingers bit with savage precision against the strings like the moving parts of a machine.

I knew in that moment with absolute conviction that the will controlling that left hand was not Leona's. The discrepancy between the emotions portrayed on her face and the mood of the music was plain now.

I watched the dead hand, trying to sense the nature of the thing that enslaved it, and the more I watched the more impossible it seemed.

My first impression of the music returned. It had seemed to me almost a *creature* of sound, a thing unto itself. Now, watching the movements of that lifeless hand, it seemed even more that it was the *music itself* that controlled those skeleton fingers, demanding to be expressed, to live.

But why then the sense of hopeless despair and unsatisfied longing that I felt in it? It was beautiful beyond the genius of man to create, this music, and yet it was overcome with a sense of having failed. Why?

Then I knew why, though I never knew *how* I knew. Perhaps in some way it spoke to me in the music that throbbed from the violin strings, answering my questioning thought.

Yet *what* I knew could not be expressed in words. Not yet. Not until I had learned what lay in those graves below. Not until I learned why Leona herself was not one of them—those who were neither alive nor dead, nor yet undead, nor any state the mind of man can grasp.

Knowing, I snapped out of the almost hypnotic spell the music had placed me in. *I had to stop that music.*

I rapped on the window. Leona seemed not to hear. I raised my fist to smash the window. Instead I ran to the front door and pounded with my knuckles.

The sound of my knocking echoed in the silence, and the music played on, and only the

music was aware of my knocking, for it changed subtly, with undercurrents of growing anger.

I rattled the knob. The door was locked.

I stepped back to gain enough momentum to break down the door. A finger of cold touched my spine. I looked over my shoulder.

Below, down the slope, over the granite stones of the graveyard, a blackness was forming. It was a blackness far beyond mere absence of light. It was a bottomless pit of *non-being* that gripped my very soul, drawing with magnetic force.

I took a step, then forced myself to a halt, to turn back toward the door, knowing that if I didn't succeed I would go plunging down to that hole in existence, unable to stop.

It was growing larger. I knew that in another moment no human will could withstand it. Even when my eyes had turned away from it I could see it with my mind.

Crying out my nameless fear, I threw myself violently against the door. The lock snapped. The door flew open. I leaped through the doorway and slammed the door shut, leaning with my back against it.

The music had not faltered a note in its angry dance, but now Leona turned toward me. For a moment she looked at me, then recognition animated her face. And wondering hope.

I pushed myself away from the door and went toward her, fighting a force that pressed against me, trying to drive me back. When I reached her I was sweating.

In a final surge of effort I gripped the neck of the violin and jerked it from her, throwing it across the room where it smashed against the wall.

"Ralph!" Leona cried. "It's you! I've prayed that someday you would come!"

Tears were streaming from her eyes. She held out her arms to me and came toward me. I reached to embrace her —and her left hand darted to my neck, wrapping itself around my throat, the bones of her fingers sinking in, cutting off my breath.

For an instant I was paralyzed with terror that was made all the more intense by the horrible grating sound of her hand as it moved. It was as though closely packed particles of glass were grinding against one another.

Instinctively I fought her hand to free myself, and she was helping me fight. It was a nightmare in which we two

fought a hand that had a will of its own.

Then, suddenly, I was free. I gulped in deep painful breaths of air. A chill shook me violently.

"Ralph! Ralph!" Leona cried. "You don't know how I've wanted you to come!" She was crying, and wanting to come to me but not daring to.

I tried to speak, to ask her what this monstrous thing was; but only a rasping croak escaped my lips. And I felt as though I was freezing. I went to the huge fireplace, which was already laid.

There was a glass filled with matches on the mantel. I took a dozen or so in a bunch and scraped them against the brick. When they ignited I flung them into the fireplace. Fire leaped up quickly.

Leona had followed me. I tried to speak again, and succeeded.

"What is this *thing?*" I croaked.

"I don't know," she said, "And if anyone should it would be I." She spoke hesitatingly. "After father died I was alone except for the servants. I had to have something to do, so I collected rare books. When I heard of one I didn't have that I thought I would want, I advertised for it. In high school I found I had a flair for languages, and I studied many of them, enough so that I could translate with the use of dictionaries, even from some of the dead languages.

"One day five years ago a man came all the way to Freemont to sell me a book. I had never heard of the book. It was a scroll, really. It was obviously very old, perhaps older than the Christian era. I bought it.

"It took me a year to translate it, and I wasn't too sure I had translated it at all. The characters were from a dozen ancient tongues, but they seemed to definitely form the pattern of meaning I got out of them. They were mostly instructions for building a shrine to some ancient god, and a magic chant that was supposed to bring that god forth from wherever he might be.

"I hired workmen and had them build the shrine in the center of the picnic grounds. Then one night I repeated the words of the magic chant in a singsong voice as I pictured those ancients doing.

"At first I thought nothing had happened. Then, in the dim light, I saw a small ball of deepest black, no larger than

a baseball. It hovered near me. I reached out and touched it with a finger of my left hand. My finger sunk into it without feeling anything. When I tried to withdraw my finger it wouldn't come out. Instead it pulled the darkness with it. I became panic stricken and ran. I think I fainted, finally, from exhaustion. When I awoke my hand was as you see it now, and from that day it has been under the control of something that is not me.

"In time I came to realize that I was its fingerhold on existence. It feeds on life force, but it dared not feed on me lest it lose its grip. It took the life from Marlow first. You remember him, Ralph? He was the gardner.

"And though he was dead, and appeared as my hand does all over, being little more than a skeleton covered with parchment, he could still rise and walk, controlled by this thing as my hand is controlled.

"More of the servants became its victims, and when the others fled, the blackness would move from the shrine toward the town in search of victims. After each victim it was larger. It grew, and grew more powerful—and more cunning. I think it knew everything that each of its victims had known. Sometimes it sought out one marriage partner shortly after the other had become its victim.

"When the town council found it couldn't cope with the problem it built the cemetery around the shrine in an attempt to confine the thing here as much as possible.

"That's all I know, or anyone knows. I've tried to die, Ralph. It won't let me. It stays away from me because it knows that if I get the chance I will plunge into it and become like the others."

She looked surprised at a sudden thought.

"H-how did you get here without it getting you?" she asked.

"I've been wondering that myself," I said, my voice less of a croaking now. "I think it must have been so absorbed in its music that it wasn't watching."

"She nodded. "That must have been the reason," she said. "But it will never let you go. It doesn't dare come in here because of what I might do, so it will either try to draw you to it out there or raise its dead to come and get you."

Even as she said this, a footstep sounded outside and

the door was flung open. The thing that stood framed in the doorway was no more than a skeleton covered by tight brown parchment, with sunken holes where eyes should be.

It turned its head this way and that, searching for me with some sense other than sight. From it came the same sound I had heard from Leona's left hand, of fine particles gritting together. Then it had located me and was coming toward me.

I picked up the first thing at hand, the heavy fireplace poker, and advanced to meet it. Whatever animated it, it was still made of atoms.

I brought the poker down with a force that was made superhuman by my uncontrollable terror. The blow shattered the head and broke through ribs before it was stopped.

The thing that had once been a living human only paused, then came on. I leaped out of its way, dragging the poker free. It turned and came after me.

I swung the poker in a sweeping horizontal arc. The poker cut it in half at the waist. The legs, still joined at the hips, kept coming. The upper part of the body began dragging itself toward me with its fingers.

I brought the poker down again and again, until the thing was broken into a dozen impotent pieces. And when I straightened up three more had entered and were coming toward me.

My terror left me. Whether it was because I had succeeded in disposing of one of them, or because there was no time for emotion or anything other than the fight for survival, I don't know.

The room semed to fill with these parchment encased skeletons. The rasping grate of their movements was the menacingly hiss of a thousand cobras.

I danced among them, striking, always striking, with the poker. When one got inside the poker I shoved and leaped back. More than one fell backward under a shove, only to climb clumsily to its feet and come toward me again.

One fell backwards into the blazing fire of the fireplace, and when it regained its feet its head and shoulders were blazing like a torch. Still it came toward me, its skeleton hands outstretched.

But others got in its way, and they too ignited. And the flames grew hotter and hot-

ter, blue in color, and the odor of a steel smelter bit into my nostrils.

The curtains on the window caught fire. Fire was eating at the walls and the furniture.

The movements of the skeleton figures became confused. tried to retreat toward the door, but the burning ones stumbled into them and spread the fire to them.

I remembered Leona now.

"Leona!" I screamed. "Where are you?"

"Here!" I heard her call, but I couldn't tell from what direction.

Briefly I saw her through the flames. I fought my way toward her, dodging the fire, shoving skeletal forms out of my way. I reached her.

"We've got to get out before we burn!" I gasped.

"Go without me, Ralph," she said. "If I die in the flames it will be the end for the monstrous thing. I want to die!"

"Not yet!" I said. "I want to try something first."

I had deliberately come close to her. My eyes were on her withered left hand as I would watch a snake about to strike. When it leaped toward my throat I stepped aside and grabbed it where the living flesh began, just below the elbow.

Before Leona had time to protest I dragged her toward the nearest flaming skeleton and thrust the hand into the flames.

Leona screamed and tried to pull back. I held on. Her screams grew louder. She was in torture. I gritted my teeth and held on.

Her hand was a blazing torch. The flames crept toward my hands but I held my vise-like grip. I could smell cooking flesh now, and I didn't care whether it was my hands or Leona's arm.

She had fainted. I didn't know when. There was nothing I could do about it, and unconsciousness was merciful for her now anyway.

After what seemed an eternity the flames on her arm burned out. It was a charred stump.

I took time to take out my handkerchief and make a tourniquet just below the elbow on her arm. Then, almost blinded by the smoke, I picked her up. It would be impossible to get across the room to the front door. I staggered to a door leading to the rear of the house.

Somehow I made it. After going through I tried to close

the door. The flames, drawn by the draft of the open door, made this impossible.

I staggered on, my throat raw from the smoke and the choking I had had. I gulped air in sobbing gasps, fighting against collapse. The fire kept pace with me and sometimes threatened to sweep past me.

Then, miraculously, I was out a side door and cool air touched my face. Stumblingly I kept on until a hundred yards separated me from the blazing inferno. There I paused to rest, and look back. The stately Markham mansion was enveloped in flames that shot a hundred feet into the night sky. Yellow flames shot with angry red.

And blackness. A sentient blackness darker than night, that filled my soul with a nameless dread. It writhed in the heart of the flames, formless, yet from its depths a *hate* reached out to touch me, and fill me with blind terror.

In my arms Leona stirred restlessly and moaned. I turned and stumbled on. Down the hill, through the woods, toward the beckoning safety of the lights of Freemont.

I didn't know when I reached the edge of the town. I didn't know of the weeks in a rest home while I struggled back from the edge of madness. Weeks during which I relived the terror of flight, stumbling as I fled the Darkness.

Leona lived. The doctors amputated her arm just below the elbow. We were married two months later when she had recovered sufficiently.

The years have gone by since that terrible night on Markham Hill. In some ways they have been happy years.

In all those years there has been no sign of the return of that formless Dark. There is every reason to believe it has gone for good.

But has it?

If it returns, it will come in the shadow of night, waiting. Waiting to reach out, to enfold.

It could be in a darkened hallway, or just beyond a darkened doorway. It is out there, somewhere, in the night. I have sensed it many times. And more than once Leona had started to tremble, and crept into the protection of my arms.

In all those years I have never quite had the courage to turn out the lights. But if, some night, the lights go out . . .

THE END

In a woman's world, colors change every season: sand brown or russet brown, grass green or river green, star white or ice white. But for Tamar red is red. After all

WHAT OTHER COLOR IS THERE?

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

MAURY had been seeing the girl around for quite a while. He'd be blowing his trumpet shrill and sweet, in the Brownsville night spot where he worked, and then she'd dance by with some vague character and Maury's ribs would dig into his lungs and he wouldn't know if his notes came out smooth, sour, or not at all.

She was that kind. Slim, tall, with a flow to the way her legs moved whether she was dancing or plain walking. Black hair fell to her shoulders, not in the mop-like way of most long hair, but with just enough wave to give it shape and dignity. Her flesh was white. Red lips, dark brows that curved like hurt wings over green eyes. She was something.

What puzzled, even worried, Maury was that she changed boy friends so often. No man in his right senses would drop her. It had to be that she did the switching. Maury kept telling himself that he was supposed to entertain her and her pals from the platform, but in spite of seven years in the racket, he couldn't put her in the paying customer niche and forget it.

He'd keep his eye on her till intermission. Then, if any people he knew were near her table, he'd walk over and talk to them, hoping somehow to meet her.

Some girls bantered the musicians, liked to call them by name and make a big deal of getting their favorite tunes played. Not this one. Her eyes would touch him, that was all,

and he'd feel as if a cool hand had brushed his face and quickly withdrawn. He began to keep track of the times she dated each man.

Usually she'd be with the same one several times in a row. Then she'd begin to look tired. She wouldn't dance, but sat at her table, watching her escort from those strange eyes. A few nights later, that man would be replaced by a new guy, and she'd glow again, she'd dance and laugh and a flush would be in her cheeks as if, except beneath those bright patches, white blood ran under her white skin.

Maury sweated and fretted, kept score of the men, and blew his trumpet. Finally, she came in one night with a man Maury knew, Ted Greaves, the town's youngest doctor. As soon as he could take a break, Maury went over to them.

"Hi, Ted," he greeted. "Didn't know you were a pub crawler. It's nice to see people I know come in."

Ted, plumpish, pinkish, and manicured, produced a thin smile. "We're even. I didn't know you massacred a trumpet."

Refusing to leave or get sore, Maury grinned at the girl. "I always like to meet steady patrons."

"Look—" Greaves snorted.

The girl slipped her hand over Greaves' in a way that made Maury burn with jealousy. "Why, Ted, I'm no end flattered!" she smiled. "Who's your friend?"

"So far as I know," said Greaves, glaring, "he's Maury Howard."

"It's not an alias," said Maury, quirking an eyebrow at the girl. She laughed, and it was a lovely sound.

"Teddy must be imagining he's a scalpel or forceps or some other nasty thing. I'm Tamar Scott. You play a sweet trumpet, Mr. Howard, when your mind's on it."

Had he been that obvious? Maury flushed and shrugged.

"I hope you'll tell that to the manager if he starts to fire me. I was playing *Stardust* the other night when the other boys tore into *Fascination.*"

"We thought it was a stunt!" Tamar protested.

Ted scowled. Maury remembered that she had been with another man the night it happened. When Tamar said "we," she meant herself and a man, but seldom the same one. Maury wrenched his gaze from the shadowed sweep of her throat. So what

if she was trouble? He'd never find anyone more worth it.

"See you around," he promised and went back for the next number.

He had her name and it wasn't a big town. Finding her address shouldn't be hard.

Keeping it might.

Maury picked up his trumpet and played with eyes on her. Why worry because she tired of men so fast? Maybe she hadn't loved one yet. If she'd been married, wouldn't that have been worse?

No, said his brain. If she were, you'd look for another doll, or get out of town. As it is, you'll stick around and try to beat the discard heap. Luck, boy! You'll need it.

He glanced back at her. Her eyes were cool green but her cheeks were a transparent blaze. Didn't some sick people look like that? And how about those periods of dullness, of fading, she passed through?

Maury was suddenly afraid. He had found his girl, but maybe too late.

She lived in a neat white rooming house. Maury had found her address in the phone book, and as he drove past, he wondered if she were home. Would she get mad if he went up without calling? He cruised around the block, making up his mind.

They'd only met last night. She might tag him for a quick explosion tomcat. But— He swung his car around, drove back, and parked. He knocked, and as he waited, for the first time in his life his knees began to shake.

He was scared silly. Of being closed out by those calm eyes, of getting a brush off. Why hadn't he waited till they'd talked a few more times? Why had he come tearing over here like a kid after his first woman? He got mad because he was scared, and was about ready to get out fast when the door opened.

Then there she was and he couldn't think of anything except how beautiful were all her ways, the surprise changing to welcome as she stepped back from the door so he could come in.

"Why, Maury—it's nice to see you. But don't you work tonight?" He moved inside.

"Not for a couple of hours."

She was wearing flat-heeled sandals, slim black trousers and a white shirt, looking entirely different from the girl he had seen in the night club, but it was a fresh, pleasing difference. This way he was tall enough to look down at the white part in her hair and

feel protective. For just a second, she hesitated before she seemed to make up her mind.

"Wonderful! You can have cheese and goulash with me. I was ready to eat when you knocked. If we run out of food, there's lots of coffee."

"Swell," said Maury, and followed through the unamazingly furnished living room into a standard kitchen, white porcelain and blue tile.

Somehow he'd expected Tamar to have startling surroundings, but even the tablecloth on the card table where the meal was laid was a healthy blue-and-white check. She's probably not here enough to bother with making the place individualistic, he thought, helping her lay another setting.

"Do you work in town?" he asked, as she poured the coffee, "or are you vacationing?"

"Call it vacationing." Her eyes darkened. "I don't work, Maury. I can't stand one place more than a month or two. Dad left me a small income."

Maury who had gotten a paper route at the age of ten and been working ever since took a quick swallow of coffee. "Why, how do you keep from going nuts? Gosh, without work any town gets dull." She shrugged.

"I knew you were earnest with all kinds of principles, even if you are a musician." She laughed ruefully. "Now that you know I'm a parasite, foam on top of the beer, are you going to turn up your nose at my goulash and stalk out?"

"Anything but!" Maury said devoutly. A stream of ideas and conjectures were flooding his mind, trying to solve the riddle of Tamar.

Unmarried, idle, restless. What appeared to be an ebb and rise in vitality—. It could be some kind of illness that she didn't want to talk about or something might have happened to make her dread ties, the same people, the same places. Whatever it was, Maury determined to go slow, not scare her into slinging things in a suitcase and leaving. He started talking about a giant tarpon that had been caught that morning, and as they ate, she seemed to relax and spoke without defensiveness.

It began to get dark. Maury glanced at his watch, came to his feet in shock. "Back to the mines before they fire me! Will you be around tonight?"

"Date with Ted," she said without gladness. "Are you two buddies?"

"Not exactly. We drink at

the same bar is all. You like him?" Tamar stood up, stroking her sleeve with a restless hand.

"No, I don't like him, but he serves the purpose. To save trouble, Maury, let me say that I abhor possessive men."

Her eyes were clear as green glass. "I get it," Maury nodded. "You're as subtle as a medic with a vaccine needle."

Clamping his jaw, he snapped himself back in line, tried to grin. "Okay, divert yourself. I work nights anyhow. But how about some afternoon? You like to swim?"

"As well as anything. Tomorrow?"

"Fine. We'll drive over to Padre Island and have the beach to ourselves. I don't like sandy picnics so let's eat before we go. See you about one?"

She walked him to the door. "I hear you," she smiled, "and all your thoughts are good ones. So long, Maury." The feel of her hand in his was with him for long after he drove to work.

They found a tannish-white beach with an improbable horde of sea birds that scattered as they parked. Maury spread a blanket he'd begged from his landlady down where the sand was still dampish from the tide so they could stretch out and play records without getting their mouths full of sand. He loaded the spindle and sank down by Tamar who was staring past him at the rounding dunes.

Sea oats and tall reed-like grass perched along the dunes like spinsters gripping their last prospect. "They plan to make this a junior Riviera," Maury gloomed. "I hope they don't succeed." Tamar lifted an eyebrow.

"You're a sturdy sentimentalist, aren't you?"

"You bet!" Chuckling, Maury hauled her to her feet. She fitted superbly inside black boy shorts and a yellow polo shirt. "I'm a man of action, too. Ready for a swim?"

"There's no place to change—"

"Sure there is. Go over and pick a nice solid-looking dune. It won't blow away before you're dressed."

She went back to the car and dug out a plastic case. "If I get sand inside my suit, you'd better blow away." She drifted off, managing somehow to walk gracefully even on the hot beach.

Skinning out of his dungarees, Maury tossed them and

his watch inside the car. He had worn his swim trunks. By the edge of the water, he stood on the damp sand and felt the cold water trickle up between his toes and run back as it touched his ankles. The surf was tossing white, roaring as vigorously as it could, but the wind was slow and not helping it; it sounded companionable, not threatening. Four birds went over in formation, one flying wing man.

Maury squinted up at them and grinned. When he glanced sideways, his content was full, for Tamar had come up. She wore an ivory suit; the only color about her was her eyes and lips and hair and those bright flushes in her cheeks. Maury held out his hand to her and they started into the water. There were many shells, some so brittle they cracked underfoot. Tamar cried out suddenly and jerked up her foot.

A thin trace of blood mixed with the water that dripped from the cut on her instep. Maury shot one arm around her and held her while he pressed on either side of the shell gash, making it bleed freely to cleanse it of dirt.

Trembling, her eyes shut, Tamar clung to him.

"Hey!" Maury said bantering-ingly, giving her a little shake. "It's nothing, honey—just a scratch. You can look."

She shivered as she glanced down. Was she one of those women with a morbid fear of blood? Maury stared as her gaze fixed on the cut. Even the soles of her feet were that smooth white. Involuntarily, he jerked out, "Tamar—your blood is so red—"

Her lips twitched. When she faced him, for a second her eyes were unfocused like someone in shock. Then she smiled.

"What other color is there?"

A dreamy amusement in her tone. Maury didn't like it. The day had changed, the salt wind stung bitterly. "Let's drive back to town," he said. "You can't swim with that foot."

She let him carry her and though she wasn't a small girl, she felt pitifully light; as if she were hollow bones and white skin and the blood that should have been in her had drained from her foot in the water— He drove back to town and all the way she leaned against him with her eyes closed and never said a word.

They had their times in the days, she always was ready to go wherever Maury wanted,

or to simply sit and talk in her apartment. She had detached good-humor and a quite attached way of responding to his love. Just one thing spoiled it.

She kept going with Ted Greaves. Maury could leave her to go to work and play through the evening in a remembering bemusement, sure that she loved him, that with care and patience he could end that restlessness of hers, and then she'd come in with Greaves, and Maury watching the doctor's tomcattish attentiveness, was miserably unsure of anything. One day, full of jealous worry, Maury had to say something or burst.

They were at her place, just back from a drive. Tamar was in her room, brushing her hair, talking to Maury through the half-open door. The way the brush tugged at her hair, caught, and then swept out of it reluctantly, stirred Maury, and at once the thought came: had Ted Greaves sat here and watched Tamar?

Maury couldn't stand the idea. He walked over and stood in the door. "Tamar, I wish you wouldn't run around with Greaves."

Just the slightest break in the rhythm of brushing.

"He's my doctor," she said, without looking at Maury. Maury felt a tightness in his forehead. He kept his hands at his sides though he wanted to go over and swing her to face him.

"Doctors don't usually foot their patients' entertainment bills. Anyway, you need more rest. If he cared about your health he'd see that you got it."

She flung the brush down. Her eyes glittered. "Oh, don't be silly! You work nights and I'm not going to stay home or sit at a table alone waiting on you. And one more thing, my amateur diagnostician, I don't care about being healthy but I do want to be alive!"

The hot words died on Maury's lips. *There was something wrong with her.* He reached out and held onto her hands as if he could keep her that way.

"Are you sick, Tamar? Tell me—! Can't you tell me what is the matter?"

She turned her face away, drew her hands free of his. "Maury, I don't want a crying towel. Just let it go that Ted gives me the treatment I have to have. That's what he's paid to do. He understands about us. I don't date anyone else."

Ted didn't seem the type to amiably keep a girl in cold

storage for another guy. Maury said, "I'd rather you went with anyone but him. And if you're sick, I want to—" She moved into his arms.

"I can think of lots nicer uses for your shoulder than crying on it—. Maury—"

The feeling of her came hotly through his flesh, sent his blood leaping, but this time he wouldn't let it make him forget. This had to be settled. He held her back by her forearms and fought to keep his voice even.

"We've got to quit walking around the subject. I love you. If you love me, you'll let me help you, at least know what your trouble is. Will you?"

Her lips curved back from her slim teeth.

"No."

Dropping her arms, Maury spun toward the door. "Then so long, baby! Parts of it were nice."

Maury was out of town for a week's run in San Antonio. He was glad of it. He didn't have to look back among the tables and watch her with Ted and she wasn't where a ten-minute drive could take him to her. It was easier to grit his teeth and say the hell with a woman who wouldn't trust him.

Say it, not mean it.

Sometimes he was sure Ted was more than her doctor and that her sickness had a brief and nasty name. Other times he remembered her as she had been on the beach that day she cut her foot and the muscles of his neck would ache as he called himself a heel for walking out on a sick girl. His week in San Antonio was over. He drove faster than he should have on the way back to Brownsville.

Tamar's strange eyes seemed to be watching him. His hands sweated on the wheel and he knew he had to see her. He pieced together all he knew about her and realized it gave no actual hint of what was the matter with her. Only the way she'd reacted to the sight of blood gave any lead. Perhaps she had one of those blood deficiencies — maybe even leukemia.

He was going to find out. Greaves' word wasn't enough. Maury would take her to Houston and see what the specialists had to say. There was no use in her living like crazy because she seemed to think she was going to die pretty quick anyway. Maury drove to her place before he even went home.

No one answered his knock. He tried the door. It was lock-

ed. He glanced at his watch. Early for her to be out. It was only five. Maybe she was downtown. Maybe she was at her doctor's—

The receptionist didn't want to bother Greaves.

"Doctor is busy," she said firmly, with that undefined use of "doctor" that always infuriated Maury—as if there were, like God, only one. Maury took her hand off the doorknob and brushed past her.

"He's going to be busier. Just stay there and mail statements!"

It was as complicated as locating the Holy of Holies, but Maury finally found the small lab where Greaves was. The doctor whirled, saw who it was, and managed a thin smile.

"Well, Howard, I don't see any severed arteries. Nothing else would excuse you. What—" Maury braced his hands on the wall.

"I want to know exactly what you're treating Tamar for."

Greaves curled his lips. "That, you know, is none of your business. I can't violate a patient's trust. Now get out of here before I get the police!" Maury walked up close.

"You're telling me," he said. "Or I'll take you apart. I'm between you and your buzzer, Teddy boy."

Suddenly, Greaves laughed. "You dope! Honestly, haven't you guessed? All those other men? Why she kept changing escorts?" He chuckled softly. "Why she settled with me?" Maury felt dizzy cold. He tightened his fists.

"I'm not guessing! You tell me!"

"Okay," Greaves shrugged. "Your lady is a parasite. A rather odd sort. No man is tough enough to stand her company long without dying, though so far she's always stopped in time. They go to the hospital, recover, and keep their mouths shut, the same as you will. Why? They know if they talk it'll be the end of Tamar and they're all crazy over her." He laughed. "A woman like that gets into a man's blood."

Maury, from a long way off, heard his own voice. "But you're healthy. And me—she never did anything. What do you mean?" Greaves smoothed his white coat.

"When I found out, I explained to her there were neater, less risky ways. As for you—for some disgusting reason, she loves you. Besides, because of my help, she could live without asking you. I've

really done you a favor, Howard."

"What in hell do you mean?" Maury's lips moved stiffly. "What are your neater, safer ways?"

"A doctor," smiled Greaves equably, "can always request blood donations for an ill person. You've caught yourself a vampire. You'd better believe me."

Maury didn't just believe, he *knew*. This explained it all. Still, he lashed out at Greaves, knocking him across a table filled with syringes and bottles. Blindly, Maury reached down and slugged the doctor again as he tried to stand. Leaving him in the middle of the broken equipment, Maury stumbled through a door.

It was the wrong one, not the way out. Tamar sat in a small consulting room. She was sipping from a white paper cup, and the liquid in the straws showed as brightly as the flush beneath her skin.

She seemed ready to spring up for a second. Then she leaned back and stared at him over the cup.

A girl on a beach with blood dripping from the shell cut on her foot—

"So red—" Maury didn't know he'd said it aloud till she smiled, in a kind of shame and triumph as she turned the straws between her fingers.

"What other color is there?"

THE END

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A DESERT INCIDENT

Perhaps we wrong them when we call them dust-devils. Perhaps we are the devils. . . .

By WILL WORTHINGTON

AFTER Juanita had succeeded in getting the recalcitrant old rams across the highway, with a few nudges under their fat tails with the toe of her boot and much shouting of "hee-yah," the mindless, gentle ewes trotted after them almost without further persuasion, and the sound of all their hooves on the flat concrete made the girl laugh in spite of her weariness. Almost anything made her laugh these days.

"How fortunate I am!" she said to herself aloud, and with her long, brown hands she felt of her own girth. Juanita was in her eighth month and not all of her fine skirts could conceal the fact any longer—not the black woolen, not the calico certainly, not even the fine purple velvet one the Husband had brought from Yuma one good year when the sheep had fetched a more than usually generous price. Since then sheep had fallen off, and this unhappy fact was reflected now in the face of the Husband—even seemed to darken the sky above their hogan. But there were good years and bad; one had to live with it.

"Only, Mother of God," the girl beseeched the shimmering air, ". . . please, not another daughter! It is bad enough with the Husband brooding there in the house like a pile of manure, what with the too little money for last year's sheep. He needs a son to make him smile again; if his frown becomes deeper, his face will surely split open like a chestnut!"

Then and there, as Juanita stood on the edge of the concrete, the unborn lashed out petulantly with one tiny limb —not a painful, rib-cracking jab but merely a fitful nudge —and Juanita knew then and there that she bore a son.

"Ah-yeeee!" she cried, and she threw back her head and laughed. After all, there were no men and no old women within hearing to scold her for laughing, for singing, for any womanly foolishness she might wish to share with the unseen spirits of the desert. "Oh how fortunate! Ah-yeee!"

Na-ah-shee busied himself tormenting a Joshua tree. He tore up great gulps of sand from around its roots and hurled them among its anguished branches with all his strength.

"It is my ill fortune to be sibling to a fool!" he whined. "It is not enough that you allow yourself to be smitten by a stonefooted mortal creature —such that you moon and sob and otherwise behave like an error of nature. This is not bad enough. No. Now you come to me with this tale of impending calamity — of a dragon bearing down upon your stonefooted beloved one!"

But Yoon-ah-shee stood almost firm, swaying slightly on his feet, refusing to partake of the coarse sand that lay about them in that place.

"But she is beautiful, Na-ah-shee. They are not so unlike ourselves. I believe as our great-parent said that they are merely crossbreeds—that long, long ago there was a mating between the towering mesas and one of our own kind, and the stonefooted mortals are the lost, unwanted children . . ."

"You may believe this as you wish," said Na-ah-shee, moving back from the sand-choked bush to survey his work, ". . . but why should the toils and woes of these creatures — dismal though they are, to be sure—concern you or me?"

"She is about to divide—to become two," wailed Yoon-ah-shee urgently, ". . . and at this very moment she is in grave peril. An evil thing bears down upon her—a dragon . . ." Yoon-ah-shee tried to move closer to his brother, but Na-ah-shee side-stepped the smaller one.

"And before this calamity occurs," snarled Na-ah-shee, "you and I will have merged with another, or we shall have divided into many and our children and our children's children shall have merged or

divided, as the case may be. In any event, there will be no memory of you or of me—except the songs we sing—and the sands will have covered our handiwork.

"Tall like a mesa she stands," continued Yoon-ah-shee, ignoring the voice of his brother. ". . . and her hair so black that even the dust I raised as I passed did not hide its luster altogether . . ."

There was silence for a moment, then Na-ah-shee waltzed over the sand a little ways and leaned closer to his brother.

"Since when do we embroil ourselves in the squalid affairs of stonefeet? They are bound by the laws of a lower order of existence than ours. Their time is not as our time. Our moments of selfhood are brief compared to theirs, I know, but we never die; only our names die while we live on, merged with another or divided into many. When a mortal finally dies there is nothing left but a terrible stench in the earth."

"All the more reason to pity them," insisted Yoon-ah-shee. ". . . and besides, do not forget that they are kin to us in ways which are more important than the ways in which we differ."

"How so?" growled Na-ah-shee.

"If you could see the dancing feet beneath the skirts of the black-haired one-who-is-about-to-divide, you would not need to ask this question," said Yoon-ah-shee sharply. "And how does it happen that they speak our language sometimes? They laugh as we do; they sing our songs; they intone our very words in their rituals."

There was silence for another moment before Yoon-ah-shee continued.

"And not a moment ago she spoke to me."

"This is not surprising," said Na-ah-shee in a somewhat pedantic whine, ". . . considering that the stonefeet learned the art of speech and song from us. But words are one thing and meaning another. How can you suppose that the stonefoot, appealing as she is to your childish nature, had words for *you*?"

"I know because I can feel," insisted Yoon-ah-shee. "There are, as you know, many truths which are so great that no words can embrace them completely and, therefore, one word is as good as another."

"Heaven spare me the toils of your thinking," said Na-ah-shee, but there was conciliation in his tone. "But couldn't

you find some cause less demanding to occupy your fleeting moments of selfhood?" he asked, by way of a final, half-hearted effort to dissuade Yoon-ah-shee from his cause. "Couldn't you find a Joshua tree to bedevil? Couldn't you find yourself a nest of scorpions and amuse yourself by flicking their tails? Or how about driving sand into the nostrils of a coyote; there is a pastime to delight the heart!"

Yoon-ah-shee wailed in real anguish, and as he did so he gobbled up the harsh sand about his feet and he towered and swelled above his brother.

"What matters is that the black-haired mortal carries something of our spirit in her bosom, and something of us dwells in the body of her unborn child. But when she is destroyed by the dragon—as she will surely be if we do not bestir ourselves—she cannot merge or divide as we might do; she will simply die. There will be no splitlings to carry on her laughter or her singing . . ."

Yoon-ah-shee became a mere sound of keening. His form wavered and shrank and the sand he had sucked up from the ground a moment before settled about him in a pathetic circle on the ground. Na-ah-shee was moved at last and spoke:

"Stay, little brother! Your logic shrivels my spirit, but I cannot abide the sound of your weeping. Besides, it has been a long time since I engaged in a worthwhile battle. It does not matter what we do, after all. It is our law that one thing is as good as another; our will is our will, and there is no 'because' or 'therefore.' So if this stonefoot means so much to you—if it will make you strong and happy again—what am I to deny you? Come little brother!"

And so Na-ah-shee and Yoon-ah-shee merged and became Neen-kee-ah—the Angry One—and Neen-kee-ah swept across the desert to summon his kinsmen:

"Come Kah-ah-nee, little dancing one, and all your brothers! Come Oon-ah-hee, frivolous tormenter of gophers! We've battle to do with a dragon!"

And Noon-ai-kee, who had been teasing a pillar of red stone by imitating its shape and pirouetting and posturing thus before it, turned and joined them;

And Kee-noo-ee, who had been busy persecuting a tarantula by driving sand into

a hole she had been digging for an hour;

And Ee-nah-ah, who had just been dodging in and out of the rocks and mesas looking for mischief anyway . . .

They came spinning and leaning and swaying, and as they came they drew more and more of the earth into themselves for strength.

They all became Neen-kee-ah, the angry one, and Neen-kee-ah became both mightier and angrier.

The bright red, low-slung car with the shop-built motor and the Italian name came roaring up out of the road-dip in second, shot past a sign saying "We Love Our Children" in third, and after having attained an anguished seventy-eight miles-per-hour in that range, was tooled into fourth. And then she began to reach for the horizon—flat out.

"Make with the soup, Daddy-o. Let's hear them pipes!"

"Gimme a drink first."

The bottle was upended in a blind moment and the last of the vodka drained off.

"Better watch the sauce, Daddy-o. Could be cops along here."

"Keep cool, Cat. This stuff don't give ya a breath. All the ads say so."

Past a string of roadsigns the little car streaked; past other signs which specified a speed limit for those who cared to observe; past a herd of sheep, who were not impressed but who were being tended by a long-legged man who was . . .

"Dam' fools!"

. . . past the austere gas station of Joe Peasely, who had come out to this country twenty years ago for his lungs . . .

"Stupid kids!"

Ahead of the racing car loomed the diesel semi of Rollo Smith—"Smitty"—who was, at that moment, composing verse one hundred and thirty-seven of "Roll Me Over in the Clover."

The driver of the racing car was not altogether incompetent. Drunk, perhaps—a little irresponsible even, but such wisdom as he had was dedicated to the handling of cars. Not everyone can negotiate even a minor change of direction at ninety miles an hour without leaving a little of themselves scattered from hell to breakfast. Zooo-um!

"Cheeessse!" said Smitty in the cab of the semi. He forgot how that last verse had gone.

The little car swayed only slightly. It could take it. Individual suspension. Balance. Real fine balance. It was built

for the tortuous Alpine roads —the challenging European courses. This highway stuff was a mere bagatelle. The salesman had said so. The advertisements said so too, and they also said that this was a car for the Sporting Gentleman—the man who appreciates the finest. Besides, it took more than a squeak of tires and a moment of queasy instability to faze Booboo and Wilma, the occupants of the little car. By assiduous and almost systematic effort—a discipline almost—they had managed to wear out so many novel sensations in their short lives that they could now contrive to be bored in almost any imaginable situation.

"Break out that bulb of tequila, Cat."

"Watch that lunkhead ahead of us, Daddy-o. Seems like every square in the country is out to clog the road today."

Up ahead moved the sedate, medium-priced sedan of W. D. Smedley of Muncey, Indiana. Mr. Smedley was, after about five years of careful planning, taking his family out to see the West Coast. Mrs. Smedley, straight-backed and tight-lipped, sat tensely in the front seat next to Mr. Smedley. Neither her expression nor her bodily position had changed in the slightest degree since having left Muncey. In the back seat two, or perhaps three small children in ropy sunsuits carried on an interminable laocoön struggle. One of them made a querulous sound.

"Well now gah-dammit, you should of thought of that at the last gas station," he said, and he kept on driving, one eye on the speedometer, the other on the road. A man with a family develops certain careful habits.

"Willard! Cussing at children!" rebuked Mrs. Smedley.

The racing car shot past.

"Good Gawd!" said Smedley, genuinely startled.

"Land sakes! You'd think there'd be a *law*!" said Mrs. Smedley.

"There is," said her husband.

In the racing car Booboo and Wilma were convulsed with glee. "D'ja see the look on that character's face when we went by? Like they was walkin' . . ."

Booboo could not notice at that moment that Wilma was shouting at him, not over the whine of the shop-built motor. He talked to hear himself.

"Hey! Lookout! That Indian woman in the road! Heey!"

There was a dull thud—not

a sharp sound, not a sound of tearing or of crushing as you might expect. Just a single, final, deadly thud.

"Ya hit her Ya hit her!" shrieked the girl, but Booboo knew this all too well. He made no answer but to stamp even harder on the accelerator. The shop built motor whined an octave higher, and perhaps it is just as well for Booboo and Wilma that it did, for there are worse sounds.

From the shadow of the great mesa off to their left, for example, where a huge mass of suspended dust and sand hovered and trembled, there was an outraged moan that shook the earth.

Smedley was the first to stop. He swerved to the shoulder and pulled up his emergency with a sound like a belch between clenched teeth.

"Keep the kids here," he said. Then he set off at a heavy run which soon slowed to a reluctant walk.

Smitty saw trouble ahead with his far-seeing trucker's eyes, and began reclutching down more than three hundred yards back. He saw Mrs. Smedley, grim-faced and sitting just as tautly as ever in their car with the two—or was it three kids standing up and clamoring in the seat behind her. He was running towards the scene with a fire extinguisher and a first-aid kit in his arms almost the moment his big semi ground to a stop. He was a road-wise veteran.

Mr. Smedley kept saying "Oh Lordy, Lordy!" over and over, and his voice was the voice of a man who sees something he knew was inevitable but wishes he could have stopped anyway. Smitty didn't have to examine the body of the Indian woman. She must have been knocked fully sixty feet. The racing car looked as though it had started disintegrating slowly and had kept on for about a hundred yards. There was a shapeless heap of metallic rubble at the end of the furrow of junk, and small flames played around it. There were smears of dark redness scattered everywhere like the spots on an old-fashioned quilt.

The trucker offered a cigarette to Smedley, who took it and said "Thanks, neighbor."

"See it happen?" Smitty asked very quietly.

Smedley's voice shook, but he kept his tone even with an effort.

"Everything happened at once. First the sports car came by me. Like to blew our windows in. Then they hit the

squaw over there and she must never a known . . ."

"Best that way, I guess. That is, if ya have to die at all . . ."

It sounded sort of silly, but at such a time everything did.

"Yes, that's the truth," observed Smedley. "That's the Lord's truth, I guess. Anyway, I seen this here now twister—this williwaw—biggest damn thing I ever saw, and coming fast from behind that big mushroom-shaped rock over there."

"Dust-devils, they call 'em out here," said Smitty.

"Oh. Yeah. Well I seen it move across the road spang in front of the sports car, and —well you know. Solid as a barn it must a been. Car went to pieces like a box a matches throwed into the wind."

The two men stood for a long time, not pondering what to do—it was too clear that there was *nothing* to do, now or ever. The desert was so quiet and the air so completely clear that they could hear the tink-tink of Smitty's engine-block cooling and the sound of each other's breathing. And then, without knowing why exactly, Smedley turned this way and that and finally asked the trucker:

"Do you hear something?"

"What like?" asked Smitty, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Well now I just couldn't say. I don't know." He felt sort of foolish, but he needn't have.

"I've been driving this stretch for more years than I care to count," said Smitty in what he hoped was an earthy, reassuring tone, ". . . and believe me, you always hear strange things out here. Always . . ."

THE END

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

Rothstein urged the use of demons as a sort of "semantic hygiene" to prevent scientists from, as he put it, inadvertently talking nonsense. Then he nominated a demon of his own summoning—Aladdin's demon, impossibly able to create matter out of nothing.

We've known a lot of people who have been making something out of nothing for years. They're demons??? Well, it's nice to see one of our creatures making good!—NL

THE FIFE OF BODIDHARMA

By CORDWAINER SMITH



This licorice stick blew a tune that was definitely not for squares . . .

Music (said Confucius) *awakens the mind, propriety finishes it, melody completes it.* The *Lun Yu,* Book VIII, Chapter 8

I

IT WAS perhaps in the second period of the proto-Indian Harappa culture, perhaps earlier in the very dawn of metal, that a goldsmith accidentally found a formula to make a magical fife. To him, the fife became death or bliss, an avenue to choosable salvations or dooms. Among later men, the fife might be recognized as a chancy pre-discovery of psionic powers with sonic triggering.

Whatever it was, it worked! Long before the Buddha, long-haired Dravidian priests learned that it worked.

Cast mostly in gold despite the goldsmith's care with the speculum alloy, the fife emitted shrill whistlings but it also transmitted supersonic vibrations in a narrow range —narrow and intense enough a range to rearrange synapses in the brain and to modify the basic emotions of the hearer.

The goldsmith did not long survive his instrument. They found him dead.

The fife became the prop-

erty of priests; after a short, terrible period of use and abuse, it was buried in the tomb of a great king.

II

Robbers found the fife, tried it and died. Some died amid bliss, some amid hate, others in a frenzy of fear and delusion. A strong survivor, trembling after the ordeal of inexpressibly awakened sensations and emotions, wrapped the fife in a page of holy writing and presented it to Bodidharma the Blessed One just before Bodidharma began his unbelievably arduous voyage from India across the ranges of the spines of the world over to far Cathay.

Bodidharma the Blessed One, the man who had seen Persia, the aged one bringing wisdom, came across the highest of all mountains in the year that the Northern Wei dynasty of China moved their capital out of divine Loyang. (Elsewhere in the world where men reckoned the years from the birth of their Lord Jesus Christ the year was counted as Anno Domini 554, but in the high land between India and China the message of Christianity had not yet arrived and the word of the Lord Gautama Buddha was still the sweetest gospel to reach the ears of men.)

Bodidharma, clad by only a thin robe, climbed across the glaciers. For food he drank the air, spicing it with prayer. Cold winds cut his old skin, his tired bones; for a cloak he drew his sanctity about him and bore within his indomitable heart the knowledge that the pure, unspoiled message of the Lord Gautama Buddha had, by the will of time and chance themselves, to be carried from the Indian world to the Chinese.

Once beyond the peaks and passes he descended into the cold frigidity of high desert. Sand cut his feet but the skin did not bleed because he was shod in sacred spells and magical charms.

At last animals approached. They came in the ugliness of their sin, ignorance and shame. Beasts they were, but more than beasts—they were the souls of the wicked condemned to endless rebirth, now incorporated in vile forms because of the wickedness with which they had once rejected the teachings of eternity and the wisdom which lay before them as plainly as the trees or the nighttime heavens. The more vicious the man, the more ugly the beast: this was the rule. Here

in the desert the beasts were very ugly.

Bodidharma the Blessed One shrank back.

He did not desire to use the weapon. "O Forever Blessed One, seated in the Lotus Flower, Buddha, help me!"

Within his heart he felt no response. The sinfulness and wickedness of these beasts was such that even the Buddha had turned his face gently aside and would offer no protection to his messenger, the missionary Bodidharma.

Reluctantly Bodidharma took out his fife.

The fife was a dainty weapon, twice the length of a man's finger. Golden in strange, almost ugly forms, it hinted at a civilization which no one living in India now remembered. The fife had come out of the early beginnings of mankind, had ridden across a mass of ages, a legion of years, and survived as a testimony to the power of early men.

At the end of the fife was a little whistle. Four touch holes gave the fife pitches and a wide variety of combination of notes.

Blown once the fife called to holiness. This occurred if all stops were closed.

Blown twice with all stops opened the fife carried its own power. This power was strange indeed. It magnified every chance emotion of each living thing within range of its sound.

Bodidharma the Blessed One had carried the fife because it comforted him. Closed, its notes reminded him of the sacred message of the Three Treasures of the Buddha which he carried from India to China. Opened, its notes brought bliss to the innocent and their own punishment to the wicked. Innocence and wickedness were not determined by the fife but by the hearers themselves, whoever they might be. The trees which heard these notes in their own tree-like way struck even more mightily into the earth and up to the sky reaching for nourishment with new but dim and tree-like hope. Tigers became more tigerish, frogs more froggy, men more good or bad, as their characters might dispose them.

"Stop!" called Bodidharma the Blessed One to the beasts.

Tiger and wolf, fox and jackal, snake and spider, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called again.

Hoof and claw, sting and tooth, eyes alive, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called for the third time.

Still they advanced. He blew the fife wide open, twice, clear and loud.

Twice, clear and loud.

The animals stopped. At the second note, they began to thresh about, imprisoned even more deeply by the bestiality of their own natures. The tiger snarled at his own front paws, the wolf snapped at his own tail, the jackal ran fearfully from his own shadow, the spider hid beneath the darkness of rocks, and the other vile beasts who had threatened the Blessed One let him pass.

Bodidharma the Blessed One went on. In the streets of the new capital at Anyang the gentle gospel of Buddhism was received with curiosity, with calm, and with delight. Those voluptuous barbarians, the Toba Tartars, who had made themselves masters of North China now filled their hearts and souls with the hope of death instead of the fear of destruction. Mothers wept with pleasure to know that their children, dying, had been received into blessedness. The Emperor himself laid aside his sword in order to listen to the gentle message that had come so bravely over illimitable mountains.

When Bodidharma the Blessed One died he was buried in the outskirts of Anyang, his fife in a sacred onyx case beside his right hand. There he and it both slept for thirteen hundred and forty years.

III

In the year 1894 a German explorer—so he fancied himself to be—looted the tomb of the Blessed One in the name of science.

Villagers caught him in the act and drove him from the hillside.

He escaped with only one piece of loot, an onyx case with a strange copper-like fife. Copper it seemed to be, although the metal was not as corroded as actual copper should have been after so long a burial in intermittently moist country. The fife was filthy. He cleaned it enough to see that it was fragile and to reveal the unChinese character of the declarations along its side.

He did not clean it enough to try blowing it: *he* lived because of that.

The fife was presented to a small municipal museum named in honor of a German grand duchess. It occupied case No. 34 of the Dorotheum and lay there for another fifty-one years.

IV

The B-29s had gone. They had roared off in the direction of Rastatt.

Wolfgang Huene climbed out of the ditch. He hated himself, he hated the Allies, and he almost hated Hitler. A Hitler youth, he was handsome, blond, tall, craggy. He was also brave, sharp, cruel and clever. He was a Nazi. Only in a Nazi world could he hope to exist. His parents, he knew, were soft rubbish. When his father had been killed in a bombing, Wolfgang did not mind. When his mother, half-starved, died of influenza, he did not worry about her. She was old and did not matter. Germany mattered.

Now the Germany which mattered to him was coming apart, ripped by explosions, punctured by shock waves, and fractured by the endless assault of Allied air power.

Wolfgang as a young Nazi did not know fear, but he did know bewilderment.

In an animal, instinctive way, he knew—without thinking about it—that if Hitlerism did not survive he himself would not survive either. He even knew that he was doing his best, what little best there was still left to do. He was looking for spies while reporting the weak-hearted ones who complained against the Fuehrer or the war. He was helping to organize the Volkssturm and he had hopes of becoming a Nazi guerrilla even if the Allies did cross the Rhine. Like an animal, but like a very intelligent animal, he knew he had to fight, while at the same time, he realized that the fight might go against him.

He stood in the street watching the dust settle after the bombing.

The moonlight was clear on the broken pavement.

This was a quiet part of the city. He could hear the fires downtown making a crunching sound, like the familiar noise of his father eating lettuce. Near himself he could hear nothing; he seemed to be all alone, under the moon, in a tiny forgotten corner of the world.

He looked around.

His eyes widened in astonishment: the Dorotheum museum had been blasted open.

Idly, he walked over to the ruin. He stood in the dark doorway.

Looking back at the street and then up at the sky to make sure that it was safe to show a light, he then flashed on his pocket electric light and cast the beam around the

display room. Cases were broken, in most of them glass had fallen in on the exhibits. Window glass looked like puddles of ice in the cold moonlight as it lay broken on the old stone floors.

Immediately in front of him a display case sagged crazily.

He cast his flashlight beam on it. The light picked up a short tube which looked something like the barrel of an antique pistol. Wolfgang reached for the tube. He had played in a band and he knew what it was. It was a fife.

He held it in his hand a moment and then stuck it in his jacket. He cast the beam of his light once more around the museum and then went out in the street. It was no use letting the police argue.

He could now hear the laboring engines of trucks as they coughed, sputtering with their poor fuel, climbing up the hill toward him.

He took his light in his pocket. Feeling the fife, he took it out.

Instinctively, the way that any human being would, he put his fingers over all four of the touch holes before he began to blow. The fife was stopped up.

He applied force.

He blew hard.

The fife sounded.

A sweet note, golden beyond imagination, softer and wilder than the most thrilling notes of the finest symphony in the world, sounded in his ears.

He felt different, relieved, happy.

His soul, which he did not know he had, achieved a condition of peace which he had never before experienced. In that moment a small religion was born. It was a small religion because it was confined to the mind of a single brutal adolescent, but it was a true religion, nevertheless, because it had the complete message of hope, comfort and fulfillment of an order beyond the limits of this life. Love, and the tremendous meaning of love, poured through his mind. Love relaxed the muscles of his back and even let his aching eyelids drop over his eyes in the first honest fatigue he had admitted for many weeks.

The Nazi in him had been drained off. The call to holiness, trapped in the forgotten magic of Bodidharma's fife, had sounded even to him. Then he made his mistake, a mortal one.

The fife had no more malice than a gun before it is fired, no more hate than a river before it swallows a human

body, no more anger than a height from which a man may slip; the fife had its own power, partly in sound itself, but mostly in the mechano-psionic linkage which the unusual alloy and shape had given the Harappa goldsmith forgotten centuries before.

Wolfgang Huene blew again, holding the fife between two fingers, with none of the stops closed. This time the note was wild. In a terrible and wholly convincing moment of vision he reincarnated in himself all the false resolutions, the venomous patriotism, the poisonous bravery of Hitler's Reich. He was once again a Hitler youth, consummately a Nordic man. His eyes gleamed with a message he felt pouring out of himself.

He blew again.

This second note was the perfecting note — the note which had protected Bodidharma the Blessed One fifteen hundred and fifty years before in the frozen desert north of Tibet.

Huene became even more Nazi. No longer the boy, no longer the human being. He was the magnification of himself. He became all fighter, but he had forgotten who he was or what it was that he was fighting for.

The blacked-out trucks came up the hill. His blind eyes looked at them. Fife in hand, he snarled at them.

A crazy thought went through his mind. "Allied tanks . . ."

He ran wildly toward the leading truck. The driver did not see more than a shadow and jammed on the brakes too late. The front bumper burst a soft obstruction.

The front wheel covered the body of the boy. When the truck stopped the boy was dead and the fife, half-crushed, was pressed against the rock of a German road.

V

Hagen von Grün was one of the German rocket scientists who worked at Huntsville, Alabama. He had gone on down to Cape Canaveral to take part in the fifth series of American launchings. This included in the third shot of the series a radio transmitter designed to hit standard wave radio immediately beneath the satellite. The purpose was to allow ordinary listeners throughout the world to take part in the tracking of the satellite. This particular satellite was designed to have a relatively short life. With good luck it would last as long as five weeks, not longer.

The miniaturized transmitter was designed to pick up the sounds, minute though they might be, produced by the heating and cooling of the shell and to transmit a sound pattern reflecting the heat, of cosmic rays and also to a certain degree to relay the visual images in terms of a sound pattern.

Hagen von Grün was present at the final assembly. A small part of the assembly consisted of inserting a tube which would serve the double function of a resonating chamber between the outer skin of the satellite and a tiny microphone half the size of a sweet pea which would then translate the sound made by the outer shell into radio signals which amateurs on the earth surface fifteen hundred miles below could follow.

Von Grün no longer smoked. He had stopped smoking that fearful night in which Allied planes bombed the truck convoy carrying his colleagues and himself to safety. Though he had managed to scrounge cigarettes throughout the war he had even given up carrying his cigarette holder. He carried instead an odd old copper fife he had found in the highway and had put back into shape. Superstitious at his luck in living, and grateful that the fife reminded him not to smoke, he never bothered to clean it out and blow it. He had weighed it, found its specific gravity, measured it, like the good German that he was, down to the last millimeter and milligram but he kept it in his pocket though it was a little clumsy to carry.

Just as they put the last part of the nose cone together, the strut broke.

It could not break, but it did.

It would have taken five minutes and a ride down the elevator to find a new tube to serve as a strut.

Acting on an odd impulse Hagen von Grün remembered that his lucky fife was within a millimeter of the length required, and was of precisely the right diameter. The holes did not matter. He picked up a file, filed the old fife and inserted it.

They closed the skin of the satellite. They sealed the cone.

Seven hours later the message rocket took off, the first one capable of reaching every standard wave radio on earth. As Hagen von Grün watched the great rocket climb he wondered to himself "Does it make any difference whether those stops were open or closed?"

THE END

Beauty, said the poet, is in the eye of the beholder—and he never even knew about

CEDRIC

By WINSTON MARKS

WHEN I retired from pro tennis I followed the horses for several years, but now I follow Cedric Dearborn. It's more fun and much more profitable.

Money was on my mind the afternoon I first laid eyes on Cedric. The horses cost me plenty the past season, and I had drifted down to the Bahamas where I heard I might pick up a few nickels with a series of exhibition tennis matches. My old Davis Cup steam was about gone, but a tennis bum like me will trade on his name as long as he can lift a racket and fool the local highschool boys with a reverse twist service.

Well, the rumor was an empty one. My name was not exactly magic when I dropped it at the local tennis clubs. Anyhow, there was no one around at the time worthy of a match.

So this particular afternoon I was sitting on the patio of a little resort, nestled in the palms, listening to the surf and watching a couple of dubs bat balls at each other on the hard court. I was awaiting the return of the resort manager to apply for a job as tennis pro for the winter, and I was even willing to do a little square-dance calling on the side, if necessary, to get my board and rum.

Because of just such "dry spells" in my erratic fortunes, I have always remained a bachelor. Even approaching forty, the ladies still find my lanky, Gary Cooperish frame, crew haircut and horse-face attractive. I can always rob

the recreation director of his job at these winter resorts if I stick around a week.

It was a stroke of luck for me that Cedric Dearborn chose this afternoon to make one of his rare mistakes. He was playing singles with a fat man in trunks and sandals. This fellow lumbered around the cement court like a gouty walrus, but he hit the ball hard and placed it well. He should have beaten Dearborn easily.

So I got interested when Cedric kept yelling the score which was piling up in his own favor. He was a neatly built little fellow, around fifty years old judging from his carefully combed gray hair. He came about up to my armpits, and he played an amateurish game of lob and chop with remarkable enthusiasm for his age.

As I watched I could see why he was winning. He had fat boy rattled. Cedric chattered pleasantly and incessantly. Such a practice is not normally good court manners. It can throw a fairly good opponent off his game.

When the set ended 6-3 in Cedric's favor, fat boy gave up, and I found Cedric standing before me in his brilliant shorts and white T-shirt, introducing himself and challenging me.

"Sun's pretty hot out there," I apologized.

"Good for you," he insisted. "You have a gorgeous tan. Won't hurt you a bit."

"No, really," I lied, "my racket hasn't arrived yet."

"You can use George's. Hey George!" He trotted after his recent rival and came back with fat boy's racket.

"See here, Mr. Dearborn," I said, "I'm really not in the mood!"

Cedric took a step backward into the sunlight and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. The glitter of a rather large stone setting in his ring made me blink. He looked at me and said, "Come on, now, let's play some tennis."

I found myself being led to the court, and a moment later he chirped, "Service!" and lashed at the ball. It floated over the net after a while, and I dinked it back. The game was on.

A few minutes later I was still wondering what I was doing out here with this gabby little runt, when he announced the end of the first game. He had won it!

I won my serve, but he forced me into a deuce game first. Then he won his service

again. With one eye on the driveway watching for the manager, I slopped around the court, chasing his short chops that dropped just over the net like lead footballs, or else spun up into the glaring sun making me squint and stretch. Soon it was 5-2, his favor.

This was ridiculous. We had only one spectator, a small-bodied girl in a big sun hat, but that was enough to ruin my reputation as a tennis teacher if this clod beat me.

So I bore down hard. I took the next game by sizzling in some serves, and I managed to win another by generating a lot of sweat. Then I focused my mind to the task. What was he doing to me? His chatter began to register in my ears. And then the amazing fact became apparent. *He was calling my shots for me, and I was obeying.*

He'd move to the right court, hold out his racket and yell, "Right here, please—that's a good fellow!" and damned if I wouldn't plant my return right where he'd asked for it!

Well, I'd fix that. Instead of crossing him up, I simply threw a little forearm into my drives and blistered the fuzz off the ball.

"Out!" he called, cheerfully. "Forty-thirty—point set!"

He served, called for my return to his deep backhand, and I smashed his lob right at his racket, but it was an inch too high. "Out again!" Cedric called delightedly. "That's my set. Thanks. I've had enough now."

"Just a minute," I said, jumping over the net. "Let's you buy me a drink."

"Swell, fine." He turned to the spectator and said, "Come on, honey, meet Mr. Seadon. Hugh Seadon, this is Sally Dearborn, my wife." She nodded, but I was too distracted to pay her much attention.

We took a secluded table and ordered drinks. When the waiter had brought them and gone I said, "Mr. Dearborn, do you realize you just won a set of tennis from a former U. S. singles champion and member of the Davis Cup Team?"

"Well, my little game is improving." His small, straight nose crinkled with pleasure. Then the smile faded like a bed sheet pulled straight with a snap. "You are kidding, of course."

"I'm not fooling, Mr. Dearborn. You made me look a little ridiculous. And that's important. I am here to get a job teaching tennis to the guests. Luckily, only your

wife witnessed the drubbing you gave me. I'll have to ask you to keep our match a secret. Your wife too."

"Aren't you being a bit of a poor sport in this matter?"

I bit my teeth together so the muscles stood out on my jaw the way Cooper does when he's facing six-shooter odds. "I am being practical, Mr. Dearborn. You practiced a little black sportsmanship yourself out on that court, and if you boast to your friends of beating me I'll pound you into your tall silk hat with your rabbits!"

"Black sportsmanship? Tall silk hat?" He spread his hands as if feeling for rain, and the look of innocence on his narrow, sensitive face was of professional quality.

"Okay," I said, "I'll draw pictures. I have played around with hypnotism enough to catch your little act out there. I missed your original gimmick, but you were a little obvious with your suggestions, Mr. Dearborn. You must like to win very much."

His hands were both on the table wrapped around his whiskey glass. He sloshed his drink around, and his ring glinted at me. "I do like winning at tennis," he admitted. "I never lose an argument, either. *Observe the small, black, automatic pistol in my hand.*"

His hands never left the table. They simply separated. In his left was the high-ball glass, but in his right hand was the gun he described. I'm afraid a little of the menace went out of my jaw muscles, but I stuck to my point. "You are still at it. There is no gun in your right hand."

Cedric chuckled mildly. "If I pull the trigger you will have a beastly time convincing your subconscious mind that you do not have a .38 caliber hole in your sternum. Now we will go for a walk on the beach where it isn't so quiet. You precede us—leisurely. Do not speak, please."

My feet gathered under me. I arose casually and strolled down to the beach. There seemed to be no compulsion in my mind. I raged inwardly, tried to swear outwardly and sent a dozen murderous commands to my legs and arms. But my whole body was in free wheeling. With the sound of the waves I couldn't hear their footsteps in the soft, dry sand, but their voices told me I was not alone.

Sally was saying, "You did it again. Your silly pride in your tennis, this time. Now we'll have to move on. Cedric,

I like it here. Why did you have to go spoil it?"

"We haven't had this problem in quite a while," Cedric reflected. "It would spoil our fun to have him around—unless—"

"You aren't going to put *him* on your blackmail list, surely!"

"My dear Sally, I dislike murder as much as you, so what else is there to do?"

There was a brief silence, and I felt as if I were being scrutinized like a slightly over-aged side of beef that a careless butcher is debating whether he dare grind into hamburger. We were approaching a rise to a low cliff with white surf churning and grinding into jagged coral reefs below it. I'm no mind reader, but I was sure we all three had one possibility in mind.

Unexpectedly, Cedric said, "Seadon, I release you. Act as you will!" I tripped over my own feet and sprawled in the sand. Before I could get up he sat down facing me and drew Sally beside him. "If you are looking for a job, Mr. Seadon, you must need money. I have a suggestion to make—"

Involuntarily I glanced down at his ring, but he had rotated the stone into his palm, and only the gold band showed, matching the one on Sally's ring finger. He smiled. "I should have said proposition. I like your looks, your tennis and your apparent intelligence. Would you care to join up with us?"

I guess Sally was more startled than I. Her blonde head swiveled so sharply that it twisted loose from the oversize straw hat which caught in the breeze and flipped off. For the first time I got a good look at her. And what I saw *belonged* on a sunny beach in a Paris playsuit. She was the kind of morsel a jaded bachelor my age has to dream of to maintain interest in the opposite sex. She was that and more. They copied her eyes when they decided upon the color for a tropical sky. Her golden hair wafted horizontally like a delicate floss, even in the gentlest of Bahamas' zephyrs. The clean, fine lines of her face and all the rest of her was why people spend money on television sets and Broadway revues.

I stared at her. She stared at Cedric, and after a long moment I knew Cedric was staring at me. "Come to, Hugh, and I'll elucidate."

I tore loose my raptured gaze, and Cedric went on. "Unless you are one of these

typical cardiacs who ruin their lives with the ambition to own everything in sight, I think you will like being with us. Your duties will be relatively light and, I trust, pleasant: teach me better tennis, amuse Sally—and keep your mouth shut at appropriate moments. In return I shall buy for you an annuity which will be validated the day we part company, provided we do so amicably. It will pay you $500 a month for the balance of your life, and until I put it in effect I shall provide you with what cash you need. Except that you may not accumulate a yacht, real estate or a lot of unnecessary baggage with my funds. We travel, you see. The price and quality of toothbrushes is pretty much the same wherever you go."

The man must be chairman of the board of Murder, Incorporated, I decided. But another look at Sally and it was still mighty tempting. "Would you consider it prying if I asked you your bsuiness?" I inquired.

"Not at all," he said pleasantly. "I was a crystallographer. Now I have an indedependent and very legitimate income, you might say. I control Hollywood and I own television. By proxies, of course."

Whoops! The man was getting silly. I addressed Sally for the first time. "Are you his nurse or his keeper?"

She flashed an indulgent smile with teeth right from selected oysters. "Neither. I tumbled to his little hobby a year ago. I'm just along for the fun. He promised me an annuity, too."

Cedric slipped a thin billfold from his shorts. "Money talks," he said, "even to skeptics. Here's some change." He handed me two one hundred-dollar bills.

"You'll get used to Cedric," Sally said, pouring white sand over her slender ankles obviously enjoying the sensation.

She lied. I never have gotten used to Cedric.

I have often dreamed of fabulous jobs, but nothing that ever stacked up to this deal. We fooled around the resort for a couple of weeks. I'd play an hour or two of tennis with Cedric, demonstrating and practicing flat strokes. Then we'd all have a cold drink, a five-dollar lunch and siesta. Cedric would read while Sally and I went exploring along the beach. Evenings we danced and drank ourselves to a congenial glow, took a late dip in the surf and went to bed.

The part that made it so

good, though, was the part that made it so rough. Sally.

I was so much in love with her you could scrape it off me with a putty knife. At first I considered it was just one of those things I had to endure, but then I learned that Cedric and Sally lived in separate suites.

This discovery broke down my resolve to keep my lip buttoned. I had feared asking any more questions lest my golden bubble go pop! The thought that all was not as it should be in the Dearborn marriage, however, turned the moths loose on my self-restraint. I had to know.

The following afternoon I got Sally out in a glass-bottom boat. We puddled around a small lagoon for a bit, then I threw it at her. "Are you really married to Cedric?"

"Nope! Oh, look, there's another one of those flat ditties with the purple fringe. I want it." She flipped off her big hat and went over the side in a splashless but sensational dive. She came up empty-handed, hair plastered around her neck and face like golden silt. "Stuck to the bottom," she gasped as I pulled her up and over. There was so little to her Bikini that she barely dripped after one good shake.

I took her little shoulders in my hands and pressed her down to the bottom of the boat. She smiled up at me. "Don't look so tragic, Hugh. I won't hold out on you. What do you want to know now?"

"If you aren't married—how come, then?"

"Convenience," she said. "It causes less notice for a couple registered as man and wife to live in separate rooms than it would vice versa—if you follow me."

"You mean you aren't—you don't—?"

"Cedric hates women and stool pigeons. When I found out his little secret like you did, he had the same three choices he did with you: murder me, pay me blackmail, or keep me with him. His blackmail list was getting so big and complicated it worried him. He said I was too beautiful an art object to murder, so here I am, same basis as you, with a slightly different set of functions."

"Which are?" By now my heart was pounding ripples in the hair on my chest. I wanted to hear the worst and get it over.

She stirred under my hands, and I let her sit up. She began drying her hair. "Well, I ward off other women by wearing this," she showed me

the plain gold band sans engagement ring. "And I protect his anonymity. You see, his name is not Dearborn. Among his business associates he is well known for his women-hating tendencies. His bachelorhood is legendary on Wall Street and in Los Angeles. So when he drops out of sight, I appear, and we make like rich ranchers from Wisconsin."

Now the big question. "And what do you think of him?"

"I like the life he leads," she said simply. She looked up from the cave of the oversize towel. "Now, let me ask one. We've been together for almost two weeks, and you haven't even tried to kiss me. You say you are a bachelor, too. For the same reason as Cedric?"

I started to reach for her to supply the obvious answer, but the rattle of oar-locks stopped me. It was Cedric. His dory bumped along-side of ours. "Hi!" he said pleasantly enough. "Just dropped out to tell you that tongues are clucking ashore. I guess I over-rated your intelligence, Hugh. Can't have my wife involved in a local scandal."

He rotated the ring on his slender finger. The tropical sun caught in the stone, and I waited his words with cold fear. He would command me to kill my love for Sally, I was sure. And I knew if he did our pleasant arrangement was at an end. He might as well cut my heart out.

But he did something even worse. "I don't understand what you see in Sally," he said calmly. "See how hooked her nose is. And that dreadful stringy black hair, and those thick ankles. Look, Hugh! See those ugly splotches of freckles all over her fat body."

I looked, and of course it was so.

Cedric nodded and started to pull shoreward. "You'll thank me for this, Hugh. It was either this or lose your--shall we say, friedship?"

It was such an obscene thing to do that if Sally hadn't grabbed my arm I would have dived over the side and tried to drown Cedric. "Hold it, Hugh," she said quietly. "You haven't lost anything you had before. I hadn't decided whether to fall in love with you, and probably it would have been a mistake. Life can get complicated awfully fast. It will be easier this way. Without a daily ration of your adoring looks, I think I can keep my head better, too." But two tears rolled down her long hawk-like beak and splashed ludicrously on the glass bot-

tom. A little striped fish nosed the spot where they hit and darted to the depths to relay the gossip to the shellfish.

I stared at Sally, head to foot, until she shivered from my expression, covered herself completely with the beach towel and turned her back to me. But I couldn't superimpose my mental image of her real self on the revised painting that Cedric had set before my eyes.

"What kind of damned black magic is this?" I demanded.

Sally's voice was calm. "Cedric has a terrible power, Hugh. But he rarely uses it for evil purposes. Don't judge him too quickly. Talk to him this evening."

I rowed in and went to the bar, but six shots of rye failed to dispel the coldness in my stomach. I was as confused as a highschool boy who sees his girl kissing the football captain.

If a man's emotions of love were so completely dependent upon the vapid imagery of his eyes, how could he trust any of his senses? I took my misery to my $25-a-day room and let my liquor-soaked brain whirl itself to sleep.

It was after six when I awakened. Cedric would be dressing for dinner. I went to his suite and knocked. He let me in. "I expected you." He lifted the phone and asked room service to send up two orders of duck. "Sally said she'd like to eat alone, and I think you want to talk. So let's eat here, eh?"

"Fine!" I said belligerently. He stretched out on a pillow-banked couch, and I straddled a straight backed chair. Soft South American music came from the wall-speaker. The open balcony doors let in the rank sweetness of the nearby plantations and strips of intervening jungle growth. It was a night for romance, complete with a low-climbing crescent of moon. So here I sat with a misogynist in his bachelor apartment.

He beat me to the first remark. "You say you like to hunt and fish. I love it. We'll fly up to Florida and do some deep-sea fishing next week. Later we'll go after some big game in Africa. I find your companionship pleasant. I hope nothing changes it. It's worked out so well to now."

I ignored the amenities. "What you did to Sally, or rather, to me, this afternoon. That's got to stop! If you throw a hypnotic noose around me every time I have a normal impulse that dis-

pleases you I'll be a walking zombie," I said.

Cedric laughed shortly, then again and finally broke out into a mild convulsion. When he caught his breath he spoke to the low-raftered ceiling of stained hardwood. "I free him of a compulsion that has him drooling around like a seven-foot ape in mating season, and he accuses me of turning him into a zombie!" He chuckled some more. "Perhaps a woman's attraction for the average male is not properly termed hypnotism, my friend, but I assure you it can be no less compulsive. Which is the key-stone of my aversion to woman-kind."

His face approached near sobriety. "No, as long as you are with us, I promise you I will not lift my command to look upon Sally as you found her this afternoon. But if it is diversion you want—"

He bounced to his feet, poured me a stiff drink and squatted cross legged under a lamp. His ring flickered, and the irridescent sparkles flashed around the darkened room like the old ballroom crystals in the colored spots. "Picture three dancing girls—" he began, and his voice took on a delighted dramatic whisper as he described them to me. He told me of the music to which they danced and their costumes and movements. And they appeared before us. Right out of the lushest Hollywood spectacle I witnessed a typical harem performance complete with veils and oriental head-jerks.

In the midst of the demonstration the waiter knocked, pushed the room service wagon into the middle of the dancers. Cedric waved him out. So genuine was the illusion that I expected the girls to trip and stumble over our duck dinners, but they danced right through them until Cedric clapped his hands and said, "All right, girls, back to Hollywood. Phtt!"

They disappeared, and so did the food cart. I said, "Cedric, would you mind materializing the dinners? You overdid the vanishing act." He laughed again. "You concentrate so beautifully. You must enjoy movies very much. Very well, Hugh, you may see the food cart again."

It was there all the time, of course, and I knew it, but my eyes refused to acknowledge it until he spoke the words of release. He offered me a platter of duck, but I wasn't hungry now. The illusions themselves weren't upsetting, but the conflict with reality was

giving me a slight case of head-spin.

Cedric looked concerned. "You are, perhaps, despising yourself for the ease with which I have manipulated your senses." He tore into the duck and spoke between mouthfuls. "I will restore your self-confidence. You are no different than any other subject in your vulnerability. No different from myself."

"That can't be," I objected. "Every one knows that many people can't be hypnotized at all. So I'm not like all people."

"Quit abusing your self-esteem. Ordinary hypnotism is a clumsy operation and barely penetrates the basic mind. Many can resist such crude bludgeoning of the mind. But no one resists Cedric!" He caressed the gem on his finger.

"What the devil is your gimmick?" I demanded.

"You wouldn't understand," he said. My expression of annoyance at his patronizing remark caused him to smile.

"Very well. This handsome stone has a tiny chip of specially polarized crystal at the apex. A flicker of light from it sensitizes the subconscious mind to any sensual suggestion. For a moment the conscious mind is helpless to censor or resist these suggestions. And as you have experienced, a properly planted command has the power of compulsion. Now, if you want the neuro-semantic background to this explanation—"

"Skip it," I told him, "I'm lost already. But how do you cash in on it? You don't go around mesmerizing bank cashiers, I hope."

"Not selectively," he said. "But anyone who likes movies or television contributes indirectly to my enterprises. You see, all cinema screens and television view-plates are coated with my crystals. How else do you suppose intelligent people could be induced to become absorbed in grade B pictures and the hog-slop commercials that are the essence of profit in entertainment and advertising?"

"I've wondered about that," I admitted.

"Have some duck," he invited.

I told him no thanks. At that moment I would have more enjoyed breaking bread with a snake-charmer. I had a case of mental indigestion to settle before I could think of eating. I told him thanks for the confidences and I thought I'd turn in early.

I got half way to the door when it burst open, and Sally

moved her ungainly, stodgy little body into the line of my retreat. She was high. " 'Lo, everybody. Have a drink!" She had half a magnum of champagne in her freckled hand, and she insisted that Cedric and I drink a toast with her. She went to the liquor cabinet, turned her back to us and poured two goblets full. She delivered them to us and came back with the bottle which she hoisted on high.

"To the three of us," she said happily. Cedric and I drank off the tingly stuff and watched Sally struggle with the long neck jug. I thought her ridiculous long nose must certainly get in the way, but she managed to slip past it and spill the pale amber wine down her chin.

Suddenly she dropped the bottle, grabbed me by the hand and said, "Come on, I want to dance. 'Night Cedric!" He looked at us curiously, grimaced at me as though to say, "Sorry, chum," and waved us good night. I guided Sally to the door with some difficulty, and she slammed it shut with abandon.

It was no sooner closed than she straightened up and beckoned me across the hall to her suite. Inside she shushed me and left her own door open a crack. In about a minute she apparently heard what she had been waiting for. She pulled me back across the hall and into Cedric's apartment. He was sprawled on the floor, head cocked and snoring heavily.

"What's this about?" I demanded. Ignoring me she reached over and gently peeled back one of Cedric's eyelids. The pupil was rolled back out of sight.

"I may not be as subtle, but I'm just as effective, you must admit," she said brightly. "He's out. Now let's talk. You and me."

She pulled up a chair opposite mine and looked me in the eye. I stared back. She was cold sober. It was still almost shocking to note the transformation of her appearance, but some of the curse was removed by the silvery evening gown she was wearing. The ugly ankles were concealed, at least. As I looked the essence of her seemed to emerge once more. I closed my eyes, and there she was before me. She spoke again and I kept my eyes closed.

"Hugh, I've been thinking."

"Yes, Sally?"

"I—I don't like your not seeing me—as I am. It bothers me. A lot!"

The tinkle of her voice

strengthened the angelic vision against my closed lids. "Vanity," I said.

"It's worse than that," she said sadly. "Cedric may have solved your problem, but he loused me up. Somebody once wrote that it was a man's eyes that makes a woman truly beautiful. And, Hugh—since this afternoon I don't feel beautiful in anyone's eyes. I guess Cedric sort of made up my mind for me."

I opened my eyes and this time there was no shock. I took her in my arms, long nose, freckles and all. We kissed and two weeks' pent up flames burst between us. I made a fascinating discovery. At last there was a bonus for closing my eyes when I kissed a girl.

About two minutes later I put her down on her feet once more and told her about my mental image when I closed my eyes.

"That," she said, "won't be necessary." She pried open Cedric's palm and, averting her own eyes, she flashed the revealed gem in mine.

"From now and forever, Hugh Seadon, see me as you saw me early this afternoon!" It worked. I made another grab for her, but she evaded me, closed Cedric's hand up again and replaced it on his heaving chest. "What he does not know now he'll never discover from us. Let's get out of here."

Nor has Cedric ever learned our secret. It takes a good deal of restraint to keep my eyes off Sally when the three of us are together, but I manage. We slipped off and got married during one of Cedric's brief sessions with his business associates, and that was probably the most unusual feeling I'll have in a long time.

I have long since gotten used to seeing her like that on the street, in the most formal dining rooms, on the African veldt and even in a Roman Cathedral, but the day we stood up before the minister her Bikini bathing suit almost made me forget to say, "I do."

It was the only time I ever tried mentally to *dress* a lovely woman with my eyes.

THE END

The scientists used to say man was made up of a lot of water and a few cents' worth of chemicals. But it takes more than a scientist to know

THE WORTH OF A MAN

By HENRY SLESAR

I TELL you I'm being followed," Garth said to the undisturbed man at the desk. The claw jutting from his sleeve, ingeniously contrived for lifting, holding, lighting matches, turning pages, was no good for desk-thumping, so he put his emphasis in underlined words. Yet still the hospital psychiatrist seemed unimpressed. Placid glass-facaded eyes unblinking, he sat, a silent listener in the chair. Until he smiled.

"Would it make you happier to know that I believed you? Of course you're being followed, Mr. Garth. But not by hoodlums or assassins; no, no. There are phantoms following you, ghostly shapes of your fears. I hear the same story, from discharged patients like yourself. The blueprint of their trauma is all the same. For them, the streets are crowded with shadowy assailants, out to fulfill the promise the War made them —the promise of sudden death. But what you need is not the physical protection of the law. No, Mr. Garth, we must make the arrest in your mind; we must track down the culprits lurking in your own emotional alleyways."

Garth slumped in the seat but without giving the appearance of relaxation; the metal spine which supported his back prevented that.

"I don't think you're right," he said.

"Ah, but I know I'm right. It's a phenomenon I've been acutely aware of since the War's end. But I don't mean to salve your wounds with

generalities. Let's talk about you, specifically."

He opened the Manila folder, pencil-marked *Garth,* on his desk. It was bulky. There were many records. He clucked his tongue at their volume and variety, but it was a reaction of professional interest and not sympathy.

"You spent how long in the hospital, Mr. Garth? The fact is here someplace, but—"

"Six years," Garth said, not bitterly. "I entered during the first year of the War, when the Missile hit. They performed a total of thirty-nine operations on me, and the recuperative, re-training period lasted twenty-six months."

"A terrible experience, of course. And equally terrible, the shock of recovery. Oh, yes, shock, because your return to the world outside the wards must be classified as a period of unique tension. For one thing, you probably reacted deeply to the transformation in the city: to the destruction of the major business and residential sections, to the failure of the public utilities, the homeless wanderers, the roving bands of looters and cutthroats, the ineffectual forces of law and order. And worst of all, the apparent devaluation of human life. Even when you realized the community was struggling back to normality, the shock was there. Wasn't it?"

"Yes. Yes," Garth said, looking away.

"You found yourself afraid. You lived with fear as a companion for every moment of your new freedom. When people looked your way, your heart pounded. When a ragged hoodlum brushed you in the street, you almost screamed with fear of attack. When a child cried out in the night, you woke sweating in your bed, certain that the cry was a warning to yourself."

"Are you telling me I'm crazy?"

"No, no, last thought in my mind, Mr. Garth. Last thought. Perhaps the War drove us all a little mad, and we must revise our standards of sanity. But fear, irrational fear, is a roadway to madness, and we have to block that roadway before it's too late. But I'll need your help, Mr. Garth."

Garth clicked the claw in his sleeve against his metal knee, in a gesture of surrender and cooperation.

"All right," he said. "I'll do what you want, Doctor."

"Fine. That's just fine, Mr. Garth." The psychiatrist

beamed. "Now all I want from you is a simple admission, just to begin. You're *not* being followed, are you? Nobody's *really* trying to kill you, are they?"

"No," Garth said, looking out the barred windows.

The Cisco Kid slapped a dirt-caked hand over Batman's mouth and flattened him against the dark side of the building. Batman mumbled and tried to bite and Cisco, wild, kneed him where it hurt most. Then he laughed and let go and Batman, tears in his eyes, said: "Oh, you lousy motherlover, what's the big idea?" "Shut up, big mouth," Cisco said, and put his face, lean and sharp like a hungry rat's, around the corner. "Here he comes. Get set, Batman old boy, get set, you motherlover, here comes money, money."

In his eagerness, his anxiety to please the sixteen-year-old Cisco, Batman, thirteen, jumped Garth when he was still in the sunlight. Cisco cursed his recklessness, but had to help. He smashed the hard edge of his palm against Garth's neck and howled when he struck metal. Then he banged the wedge-shaped rock he carried against Garth's forehead until their victim went down and made no living sound.

"Drag him inside, inside!" Cisco said, in a rising voice. He yanked at Garth's feet and Batman tried to lift the head; it was too heavy for him. They both went to the feet and dragged the body to the cellar door in the side of the old building.

They were more careful getting him down the steps. It was important to be careful. "Okay," the Cisco Kid said. "Take off his clothes."

Batman stripped away the hospital suit, babbling all the time. "What'll he bring, Cisco, huh, watcha think he'll bring?"

"I dunno, I dunno," Cisco said, lighting a butt. He stepped away and surveyed the corpse professionally. "That arm ought to bring around ten, maybe fifteen bucks. The leg's good for twenty. I hear they use real gold in the neck brace, so that oughta pull a good forty. The silver thing in his head should be around thirty-five. All in all, I'd say he's worth a hundred bucks."

"A hundred bucks! A hundred bucks!" Batman said, clutching his friend in excitement and ecstacy. "Oh, sweet mother of mercy, who'da thought he'd be worth a *hundred bucks!*"

THE END



THE WARREN

By RICHARD BRIAN

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

The two were old, and the one was young, and the one they waited for was—what?

HIS net was fast and sure. The boy went on, worked the pilings at the far end of the bay. He used a flashlight, stunned the crabs and scooped doubles of softshells and hardshells from the web of upright logs. Interrupting their mating brought him a quick fear of some unknown retaliation and he took his basket ashore, searched in the eel grass for prey that could offer more resistance. Then he heard screams again and again and he ran forward,

leaving his gear. They were racing over the dunes from the great house on the hill. It was a behemoth of a house, a water creature alone and against the bay. They raced toward him. The old man and the old woman. As fast as they could manage they raced to the fire near the shore.

"Sit down, sit down," the old man whispered. The three of them sat by the fire and the old man told the boy how he had lurked in the shadows, broken into the giant house.

"He did. He did," the old woman said. "I waited to be sure." She told the boy that they had walked by the bay, had seen the owner of the house chased across the water at ebb tide. The old woman and the old man alternated in telling what they had seen and then the old man became the sole story teller, the only voice in the world. Winds came up on the bay and it was cold and great cats shivered about the fire as the old man spoke.

He told the boy how fast the owner ran. He told him the owner was trapped out on the bay. The boy listened intently. As if it was a secret, they never mentioned the owner's name. They referred only to "him," "he." It seemed to be a secret they would keep until he emerged from the burned out night club.

"I don't believe he's comin'," the boy scoffed. "There's nothin' but rats in that night club. Maybe in the grass there's eels." The three remained on the sand, the wind strong. The cats about the fire howled and far in the distance the great and lonely house seemed to tremble.

"It's true," the old man said. He put his hand to the woman. As if he mocked the dead waters, his voice rose and fell and the boy knew he would hear a tale he had heard since infancy, a tale that was nameless and had ever been a part of his life. A tale that had happened years before.

"You must remember it is true," the old man said. He held forward his arms as he spoke, moved his arms wild in the air. "The man and woman were alone!" he screamed. "They had not known the husband was home. *They were alone so many years ago.*

"The husband heard them! He had rented the room to what he thought a harmless man: a worn and failing Preacher!

"The Preacher had life in him. No! Not alone good

frolic. An understanding of life all must be born with—or learn for their living.

"The woman was beautiful, but the husband had long forgotten her—save when he could use her for floors, or his dishes, or other toil. She had hair golden that swept to her back and her eyes were blue—even the green of the husband's money could not subdue them. The husband had countless money, of all denominations, and he bragged that he kept it hidden in the house. The dream he once had of a farm disappeared—the green of money verdure enough. Her eyes stayed blue and she did not shrivel like he.

"His love was for the silent ones, the creatures that made naught a sound, or just a gurgle in their throats; the two of them. Drunken-eyed males. White rabbits that ate much and demanded the caress of his hands—hands warmed as much as they were. There was no meat in the house, but he had gone to buy pellets.

"So you see the animals were a part of it, their silence. The husband was bent at their cages, feeding them. He heard sounds and words of love come down through the wooden skeleton, the balloon frame house that shattered with each movement. It seemed earth and life commended the frame to tremble.

"And the husband stole to the speaking stairs, which were like a child's treble and tugging to the grown-life voices of the lovers. His merchandise was stolen. His shop was robbed. He heard the Preacher's voice and it infuriated him to hear a tale that could make his wife want to live, that could bespeak at least tragedy in contrast to his sodden way.

"Words like: *I was,* came to him. Words crying that the Preacher had had wife and son and a congregation. Words that said one by one the Preacher's family died. The wife in childbirth. The son because in rage he killed and was slain by his fellow man. The husband heard a tale that rent the wife's heart—of a Preacher who lost himself and his flock, of a hundred Sundays of sermons all the same: the words about his son or the meaning of his son.

"For love and her husband the woman knew she'd given child to the Preacher—and, in the silence of all but them and the stairs, her husband knew his first rage of a decade. He broke a place in

the stairs. His foot crashed through the door at the same instant his hand sought the inside lock.

"The Preacher's head was held tight, cradled in the woman's arms so that he was not aware of any but the first blow from the husband's thin fists. He fell unconscious on the bed.

"As his wife pulled away from the Preacher the husband suddenly found control. The beauty of his wife was not seen to him. It was as if his piece of merchandise was no longer fine silk and his evil mind found another purpose for it. She could be more a rag which he could use. She was a tattered rag now—there was not the slightest inclination for him to spare her.

"First, he took all the money from the Preacher's pocket. Then he looked about the room, his pig eyes darting and searching to degrade his wife."

The old man stopped short from his story. His voice was hoarse and he cleared from his throat the dryness that had settled there. The three of them faced the burned-out night club and whenever they talked he'd grunt short phrases or be silent.

Their backs to the fire in the sand the boy cried out as a great cat, smelling fish and leering greedily, leaped and clawed at him. It was the first sound the boy had made. The old man grasped a stick of fire and singed the cat. Large as a dog, it growled viciously and edged away. It did not run but remained a safe distance from the fire. Several other beasts, as broad and as mangy, joined it.

"People and cats," the old man said. "They leave them here for winter and they get like this. They have to or they die in these dunes because they can't catch a fish or a field mouse or a rabbit."

"People ought to be put in jail for their vacations," the woman said. "That way they wouldn't leave no cats." She looked off into the distance, joy in her eyes.

"I don't know why I come when you called," the boy said.

"You came because you're curious," the old man laughed. "Curiosity killed the cat."

"He told you a story, boy, and you won't believe in him. When he tells a story he don't lie none. He's told you many times."

"Always lie to children," the old man said. "If you don't they get disillusioned and dissatisfied."

The cats growled and hissed outside their circle. One of the cats leaped after a rabbit that had come out of the reeds and then more from the same burrow followed it. All of the rabbits got into the dunes and the cats, after tearing and then loping a distance, sulked back to the fire.

"If you say he's comin' why don't we wait at his house?" the boy asked. "It's maybe a ghost house but it'd be better'n these stinkin' cats."

"Ain't no ghost house," the woman said. "People exaggerate him. Make him moren he is." Far behind them, the house trembled and seemed to be pushed toward them in the wind.

"That's so," the old man said. "He's less than you or I —ghost house or not."

"There's a lotta money in that place. The firemen tried to take it in the fire." The house clattered incessantly, applauding the boy's words.

"You're right," the old man said. "But he's less than you or I."

"I think you're two ole liars. You're an ole man and she's nothin' moren a crazy woman with religion."

The old man held the woman's arm back as she screamed: "I tell you, boy, you should not take things lightly. The day of reckonin' will be! And you'll be in your death bed. You'll be standing. You'll be standing—knocking. Knocking so hard and you won't get in. You won't boy."

"I godda old man who's half off his rocker," the boy said. He paused for a moment and stared at the woman. He forced cruel words on her, his mood hurt him. "And I got an old lady that's completely off her nut. The other day I catch her sweeping the front of the Five and Dime with a cardboard: SUNDAY."

"Your mother should not profane the Sabbath," the old man said softly. He put his arm about the woman, held her close to him, protecting her from the harsh winds on the bay. "Yes," he said, "we have loved you very much son." The woman's eyes brightened.

"I didn't see him run to that night club," the boy snapped. "I don't believe he's out there."

"The greatest believer is he who first doubts," the old man said. "He will emerge. When the tide drops to ebb he will be before us. He will come from the charred remains of that night club because I saw him trapped by the tide. That is why we ran to find you boy.

That is why we went to his house."

The cats dared to near the fire again and the boy, braver now, drove them off. He pulled his jacket tighter to him and moved closer to the flames.

"If it wasn't for me," the boy said. "The two of you'd starve. If it wasn't for me." The old man smiled at him.

"We want to show you," he said. "We love you for what you do. Don't think we don't. We want to show you him."

"We know what people say to you," said the woman. "We love you. It don't matter."

"I don't care what no one says. What anyone says don't bother me at all." The boy felt embarrassed. He had always been a shy and a wild boy. His contempt for most people brought out the wild in him. He was really hateful of himself.

"That night club out there," he said. "When was that burned?"

A sudden light flickered up from the fire as with the rise of life in the old man's blood. He put a hand on the boy's leather jacket and pulled the woman closer.

"Twenty years ago," he said. "Years before you came this place was a dearth of sin —and crime—and evil women. Before I met her." He smoothed the woman's hair.

"Don't tell me that junk no more."

"Look!" the woman cried. "The water's lower in the mud—the foundation of the night club is almost from the water. Soon it will all be mud. He will come out soon. You will see him go fast to his house." Her eyes were crazed and her eyes blinked as she gasped for breath and the cats stirred behind them. She stabbed her finger again and again toward the house in back of them.

The old man was obsessed by the voice that had risen from him. He seemed to look on the charred and hollowed remains of the night club as a graven image he had conquered. A fallen image answering him and carrying him to defeated evil of the past, to the fruit of abundance the past would yield to his belly. His eyes remained there, communicating, linking these tastes to them: his arms were strong about the woman and the boy and just their touch startled the boy from inattention. They were three burning forms, melded together, listening to a voice that in itself was as much a story as the tale he repeated: a voice that

was the wind in caves of a million years before: a voice that rose and fell and could scream so that the flames behind them bent. He repeated the tale from the beginning.

"And the husband came to have money!" he screamed. "He laid aside all toil and took his bride. He took her from the City of Sin to Wilderness." His voice became softer, went on relentlessly, repeating words again and again. "He made a Sin of Wilderness!"

"By an accident of fate they had married. A girl who was beautiful at birth and could do such beauty on Earth.

"He had turned the way he was *after* the bride. For she could have been his grace. The bride was soft of movement and eye—as beautiful as faith and passion. But the husband was lust and cursed that a child was to be born. And, even before their child came forth and died, he hurt the bride, made her passion sterile by his demands of attending him and a clean but barren house."

The cats had now formed a line that faced the water. The cats howled at the charred remains, the greatest of them stepping to the mud. Winds tore among the weeds in the foundation. The tassles of the reeds were blown to the ground and came back fast to shiver and throw shadows on the wood. A lone rabbit escaped from the reeds again but the cats did not hear or see it.

"The husband had come into money and a home," the old man said. "And in a room above them lived the Preacher. The place was a slum—since then too lonely to be a slum, too far and full of rats and smells and the washup of the bay. The Preacher lived above them and the husband made her live in dirt and have no better. He went on with his life, demanding.

"The woman had only one thing that she loved. Secretly, she gave them to herself. Carvings of soap, graceful shapes of animals and ballerinas and things of nature. They were the idols of the child, the bond between her and beauty. She had them on the headboard of her bed and she would look at them in an attitude of prayer. They were her past, what she had brought to the marriage, and only she understood the feeling that made them.

"As the Lord would will, a stranger came to their house and assuaged the woman's sadness. The Preacher knew the woman's sadness. The

Preacher was a lonely man, bore the weight of tragedy on them—"

"Ah, I heard all that," the boy interrupted. "Let's get out of here. No one's comin' out of them ruins."

"He will come out!" the woman cried. "Wait! Wait! The cats are waiting!"

The old man's eyes were lost and he seemed to stare at the cats on the shoreline. He told the boy once more how the husband had found his wife with the Preacher. Then his voice was lost as his eyes and only found strength in the surge of his story:

"I remember most her final degradation. I remember in that room how it must have started.

"Yes, the husband had seen the carvings of soap on the shelves—above the battered figure of the Preacher. Evil is the greatest scientician. She could not even move. The husband swept all her carvings to a blanket and folded it tight, led her down the stairs. He dangled the carvings of soap that she loved as much as life.

"Then, he made her sit in a chair and he took the delicate art and immersed it, one by one, in water.

"It was her final degradation. She had sat still and horror-stricken until he came to the last carving—a rabbit she had carved when she'd striven for his love and which he had scornfully disdained. All he cared about was quiet rabbits!

"Something snapped inside of her. Malicious and relishing the last object, he was not prepared to stop her as she screamed and leaped to his rabbit hutches.

"She threw the cages wide and let one male at the other. Their fur was driving snow and she laughed insanely, holding her husband back from them, beating like gulls against his chest and ripping at his face.

"And then I tell you there was silence. The Preacher was at the stairs. Her husband held the soap rabbit loose or it would have melted with his sweat.

"The rabbits died and as I am next to you I can tell you the husband's eyes went red. In my last words I can tell you that the rabbits ended their life of quiet. They cried out for the first time. They cried out to Our Heaven Above!"

The old man's words were finished and the woman leaped up. Suddenly, she flailed her arms. All the water had

soaked below, the bay was but mud.

"My husband bought no more rabbits!" she screamed. "Look! He comes out! He comes out now!"

In the light *he* had come out. In the mud of low tide he hopped across the bay from the trap of the burned-out night club. His feet hardly seemed to touch the slime that even the quick cats were caught in as they chased him through the seaweed. He was ahead of them and wheeled to a stop at the shoreline.

For that instant, that terrible instant, the boy saw the man in moonlight, frozen there. He was bent almost to earth and his white hair covered his cheeks, his chin, and all his neck, growing about his collar. Bent, he took on the aspect of a four-legged creature, with his arms stunted front shanks. His eyes were reddish and his head and ears warily snapped, side to side. Save for the club in his hand he was a rabbit and the cats came for him.

"And that would have been your father," she screamed. "Would you have that for your father?"

"Yeah," the old man shouted. "The wrath of God is upon him! For he killed what lived and sired the dead. And he drove us to the streets to curse our names and break our lives!"

Over the dunes, the cats could not be seen and the rabbit man, like light, was gone. A door slammed shut in the night, in the house in the wilderness.

"He is home and is quiet," the old woman said.

"He is in his warren," said the old man. "Till tomorrow night."

He spoke softly to the boy.

"So they chided you of your heritage? Here is your heritage." He ripped the lining from his coat.

"It belongs to you. I took what was yours when I saw he was trapped." Money of all denominations flurried to the ground.

The boy was in shock.

"Take it," the old man said. "We have loved you always." The boy reached down.

"Take it," said his father. "I put lettuce leaves where I found it." The boy laughed, stuffed his pockets. He could not control his laughter and they all laughed together; laughed together in the quiet night, warm and close, until the boy took their hands and led them along the bay. They walked home in night that was close to morning.

THE END

BEDSIDE MONSTER

By
JACK
SHARKEY

Laura was surprised by her husband's laissez-faire attitude. Other men would not have been so tolerant . . . other men would not have been so clever.

I DON'T know when I consciously decided to do something about Jason and my wife. I suppose that from the moment I knew that there *was* anything to do something about some hidden corner of my mind began to fabricate a grisly revenge. They had done me no real hurt except to my pride—my heart had for many years been out of reach of Laura's claws—but pride was enough. All I really had in life were my pride and my practice. By flaunting her attachment to another man at me Laura hurt my pride, but directly. By flaunting her newfound love to the world, she hurt my practice, if only indirectly.

People grew strange and distant, and appointments were cancelled abruptly. I suppose it only natural that people should doubt the capabilities of a doctor with strangers when he had proven so inept with his own wife.

Perhaps I'm wrong; maybe the slackening of my practice hurt more than my injured pride. If Laura had wanted to run off with another man fine. She should have run off and been done with it. I don't really think it would have affected me very strongly. Such an event would if anything, have *helped* me in my work. I'd have been the deserted party, the poor betrayed spouse, a magnet to the sympathies of my patients.

As it was, I was a boob, a cuckold, a sucker. No wonder my patients doubted and despised my weakness.

For Laura had not left me.

She still bore my name, lived in my house, hostessed my infrequent parties, and in every way let the world know that she was tied to me legally. On the other hand, she never missed a chance to mention to my friends how poor a mate I was, and how she enjoyed her paramour's attentions much more, in his apartment hardly a mile from my home. As I said, she lived in my house—but only by day. And everyone in town knew where she spent her nights.

I don't know what brought me to the breaking point, or even just when it occurred, but break I did. I was tired of —how do they phrase it?— messing around this way.

I gave Laura an ultimatum. She could have a nice legal divorce, alimony, and her share of the community property, if she'd just go off and leave me be. She laughed and refused.

I guess *that* was when I decided to do something about them.

"Laura," I said to her, early one afternoon when she'd just returned from shopping, "I have a gift for you."

"Really?" she said, with elaborate unconcern. Laura set down her purchases—more clothes, more hats, more shoes—and smoothed her already-smooth ash blonde hair at the temples. She wore her hair in an upsweep, to show off the curved perfection of her ears, and their glittering diamond clusters screwed fashionably tight to the lobes.

"Yes," I said, controlling my temper, "really."

I set the box on the table beside my armchair, and determined to mention it no more until she did. I knew she didn't care *what* I gave her; I also knew that she'd be unable to resist looking at the gift, if only to refuse it or laugh at it.

I took the afternoon paper from my lap and began to read it, affecting unconcern. Irritated, Laura hesitated at the door of the room. I could feel her eyes on my face as she began to peel off her long gloves, her hands working automatically. I turned a page carefully, keeping my eyes aimed at—if not focused on—the newsprint before me.

"All right!" said Laura. "What is it?"

"Look for yourself, dear." I said gently. "It's a sort of surprise."

"I hate your surprises," she said, in an ugly voice. But she was crossing the room as she spoke, and had the package in her hands in a flash. Her slim

fingers plucked away the ribbons, and her blood-hued nails shredded the wrapping paper on the box.

"Do you like it?" I said, as she lifted the lid.

"If this is another of your stupid little brooches, or sick-smelling Parisian perfumes—" she began, then stopped short as she spread the internal tissue wrapping apart.

"Wh-What in the world—?" she faltered, staring into the box.

"Do you like them?" I asked, lowering my paper. I knew the answer even as I asked. Platinum is a beautiful metal. Not many people can recognize it, it looks so much like silver. But Laura was one of the few.

"They're beautiful, Edward!" she said despite herself. She held the two rings in the palm of one hand, watching the light gleam brightly off the satin-finish surface of the twin bands.

"And they're inscribed." I said with a smile. "Inside the band darling."

Laura lifted the two rings up before her eyes, between thumb and index finger of each hand, like tiny binoculars, looking for the inscriptions. When she saw them, she gasped.

"Is this some sort of joke?" she asked weakly, her mouth uncertain whether to smile or just gape.

"My dear, don't you like them?" I said solicitously. "I thought you'd be pleased. *'Jason'* and *'Laura.'* One for you, one for him. I—I hope I haven't offended you?"

"Why, no . . . No, you haven't. It's just that I'd rather thought you felt—well—*strongly* about us. And then, to give us something like this—?"

"My darling" I sighed, "this is the twentieth century." I hated that cliché but it was one of Laura's favorite phrases, so I knew she'd appreciate the *laissez-faire* philosophy of it.

She looked sharply at me as I spoke, and I forced my features into a deliberate innocence. After a moment, as though it hurt her to do it she managed a smile and leaning forward, kissed me quickly on the forehead. "Thanks, darling," she said, lightly, then turned and, retrieving her packages, swept out of the room.

My plan had begun well.

The next morning, the newspapers were full of the deaths at the zoo. I knew the details of the crime before

I picked up the *Herald* at the breakfast table but I read them over anyhow, enjoying the stir they'd occasioned throughout the city.

MANIAC KILLS ZOO ANIMALS!
5 FOUND DEAD!

The five Canadian timberwolves at City Zoo were found dead in their cage this morning. Medical examination showed the deaths to be the work of a maniac. The animals had been fed drugged meat, and while unconscious had had their spinal and cranial fluids drained off, resulting in death. Police are seeking someone with considerable medical training, as the report shows the punctures, probably made with a hypodermic, to be the work of a skilled technician. Police guards will patrol the zoo after dark until zoo officials are certain that no repitition . . .

I refolded the paper contentedly and ate a hearty meal.

After breakfast, I stopped at the hall telephone long enough to call Mrs. Belden, my nurse, at the office.

"Sarah? . . . Doctor Crayden . . . I won't be coming down to the office today. Will you cancel my appointments, please? . . . No, no, I'm fine. Something's come up at home, that's all . . . Yes, thank you . . . I'll be in tomorrow as usual . . . Fine . . . Good-bye."

I hurried up the stairs, taking out my keychain as I did so. Selecting the key to the east wing, I moved to the thick oak door that divided my home laboratory off from the rest of the house. No one but myself had a key to that section of the house.

Laura, as women will, was intensely curious about that part of the house. She had no real interest in my work, just an insatiable desire to know everything about everything. When I'd first had the equipment installed in the wing, I'd purposely taken her on a tour of the lab. Half an hour's chatting about tumors, glands and abnormal skin conditions had done the trick. She'd left the place quite a definite shade of lettuce-green, and had never asked further about my work there.

I usually worked in there at night, when she was—when she was "elsewhere." But today, I was in a hurry. Those fluids from the timberwolves would keep a few hours under refrigeration, no more. I had to work with them while they were still fresh . . .

Part three of my plan took

place the following night. It was Laura's birthday, and we were having a group of people in.

I played the part of the host well. I'd even dropped a casual mention that—while the gift of the rings had been to show that I harbored no hard feelings—I'd much prefer it if Laura didn't have Jason over for the occasion. Within five minutes of my declaration, Laura was on the phone, asking him to the party.

It was a wonderful party, too. It began at eight in the evening with a sumptuous dinner. Toward the end of the meal when Laura as was her habit, was regaling everyone present with all sorts of morbidly detailed accounts of her extramarital affair, it was a simple matter for me to drop something into Jason's cup. Very simple. The stories Laura was telling were of a nature that, while fascinating, had a slightly embarrassing effect on her audience because of my presence there. They studiously avoided looking at me while she spoke. I could almost have stepped round the table and cut his throat with the carving knife undetected.

But I had better plans for Jason.

As Laura finished episode number four, everyone chuckled self-consciously and, like a trained chorus, all turned and took up their cups to down the last of their coffee. All the cups were safely returned to their saucers save one, Jason's, which cracked itself in two upon the handle of his fork as it fell from his shocked-open hands.

"Jason, what is it?" said Laura's voice.

Incapable of speech, he was standing half-erect at his place, his face plum-colored around eyes that bulged and ran water down his cheeks. Smoothly, without haste, I left my place and reached his side, where I proceeded to deliver the time-honored—and here futile—slaps upon his shoulderblades.

"Must have—" he gagged, "must have gone down the wrong pipe!" He managed one small, weak smile at his lack of dinner manners before falling back into his chair, unconscious.

"Quickly!" I said to two of the men hovering near us. "Help me get him upstairs!"

With Laura following, wringing her hands and chattering inane words of worry and concern, I helped the men carry Jason up the stairs to my laboratory. I cast a sur-

reptitious glance at Laura's face, but she'd as yet thought of nothing but the fact that Jason was taken ill. In a few more moments, she might recover enough of her poise to realize into *whose* hands his health was being given. But she hadn't, yet.

The men held him while I produced the key to the door of the east wing, then, at my instruction, carried him inside and laid him, blue-faced and silent, upon a white-sheeted cot that "just happened" to be standing empty inside the room.

"I'll take care of him. Thank you," I said to the men. I wasn't foolish enough to even *try* to have Laura leave the room. Even as the men were going, her eyes had taken on a suddenly cold, calculating look, which I avoided meeting as naturally as possible.

Rather than say something weak and foolish, I enlisted her aid. Keeping her busy was the simplest way to keep her from thinking on the fortunate aspects—from my perspective—of Jason's form being in my power, as it were.

"Quick, Laura," I said, gesturing toward a rack of stoppered flasks upon the wall. "Get me the bottle marked 'Adrenalin.' It's the one with the rubber hood over the mouth."

I knew that almost *everyone* had heard of adrenalin. To the layman's mind it seemed just the sort of thing to be employed in the case of a person's losing consciousness. Laura, the exigencies of the situation washing the coldness from her gaze, hurried to get the bottle.

As she returned with it to the side of the table upon which her lover lay, I'd already taken a hypodermic syringe and chrome-plated needle from an alcohol bath conveniently near at hand, and was fitting the needle onto the neck of the syringe.

"Give it here!" I said, taking the bottle from her.

She stood watching me as I inverted the bottle, plunged the point of the needle upward through the rubber membrane and drew off a full syringe of the colorless liquid.

Keep her busy, I told myself. Don't let her think.

"Here, now. Hold his arm for me, will you?"

Laura, who'd seemed on the point of saying something, moved to her lover's side and obediently took hold of his arm at biceps and wrist.

"The sleeve!" I snapped impatiently. "I can't go through the *shirt*!"

Very much flustered, Laura unclasped Jason's cufflink and shoved the sleeve upward to his shoulder.

"Steady, now," I said, glancing at his face. Already it was losing its bluish overtones and reverting to its normal shade of rich tan. I hoped she'd be too concentrated on the needle to note this interesting fact. "Hold the arm rigid." I cautioned. "I don't want a muscle spasm breaking off the needlepoint under the skin."

This had the desired effect upon her. Her eyes remained glued to that muscular, golden-skinned arm as I sought, found and invaded the vein at the hollow of the elbow joint.

"Careful!" I said, as I depressed the plunger slowly, watching the crystalline liquid pulse into his bloodstream. "Easy . . . hold that arm steady . . . there! That's got it."

I jammed a wad of alcohol-soaked cotton against the skin near the shaft of the needle, and, pressing it down firmly, I withdrew the hypodermic from his vein. Jason's arm had jumped a bit with the insertion of the needle, which had helped to keep Laura's eyes from his face.

"Hold that cotton in place for a moment, dear," I said, taking the bottle of 'Adrenalin' and the empty hypo away. "He'll be all right. Don't worry."

Jason's eyes were fluttering open, now, and he and Laura indulged in a where-am-I-what - happened - darling - you're - all - right - don't - move-for-a-moment dialogue. It fitted the chummy scene.

"Perhaps" I said returning to them, "you'd best take him home, Laura. He'll need a bit of rest."

"Yes," she said, with a grateful smile that somehow stung me with its honesty. "Yes, perhaps I'd better."

"I'll explain to your guests," I said, generously.

"Thank you, dear," said Laura, kissing me lightly on the side of the face. I felt myself reddening, and hated myself for my weakness.

"Don't mention it," I said, turning away. "He'll be all right, now."

After they—and then the guests—had gone, I returned to my laboratory, put the *real* bottle of adrenalin on the shelf in place of the other, and crushed and destroyed the hypodermic syringe, needle, and rubber-topped bottle. Then I went downstairs to check on that cup. But the maid had already cleaned up

the fragments and thrown them into the garbage.

Nevertheless, I searched out the two shards of coffeecup in the garbage can later that night, and washed them in boiling water before replacing them for the City Sanitation Department to take away. Then I returned to my laboratory.

All facets of my plan were now completed. It but remained for me to set the wheels of disaster in motion . . .

I checked the wall clock. It had been three hours since I'd given the shot to Jason. The serum I'd made from the fluids of the timberwolves—with certain alchemical additions that would have raised every eyebrow in the A.M.A. —should be taking effect momentarily.

I chortled deep in my throat, thinking of Jason, with his magnificent youthful body, his curly hair and golden skin. In the next half of an hour, he would be undergoing a metamorphosis not unfamiliar to devotees of horror movies. And this change needed no full moon to bring it off.

Soon the flesh of his body would begin to itch, to grow tough and raspy to the touch. Then the coarse sproutings of gray fur all over its surface, the sudden thickening and lengthening of his finger- and toenails. And his mouth, with its sensuous pink lips, changing, twisting. The upper lip growing swollen into a dark, cruel muzzle, his lower jaw jutting forward until his teeth were in a position to slash and worry the throat of the next person he encountered. There would be no resisting the base animal lustings for blood. The serum, coursing through his brain, would override any horrified protests of his dulled conscience with its animal proddings toward tearing with his teeth at the next person he saw.

And that next person would be Laura. I'd made sure of that. I took no chances on her being elsewhere when he turned into the hideous lupine nightmare. I daren't count on her staying with him just because she always did.

That was where the rings came in. I'd noted at dinner with considerable satisfaction that each of them wore the tiny platinum bands I'd so generously given them.

And even now, in my laboratory, I was undraping the small-but-powerful machine that would activate those rings. Once the switch was thrown, the wearers would be powerless to leave the pres-

ence of each other. Laura would be manacled to Jason by a desire, well-nigh irresistible, that would feel as though it were her own.

I threw the switch, and the tubes of the machine began to hum and quiver and glow.

Laura would feel an unaccountable urge to remain with Jason, even stronger than her natural tendencies to do so. And while she was there, bound to him by will-numbing electric signals from the machine in my lab . . . The *change* would begin.

She'd be helpless, watching him turn from a young handsome lover into a hairy, slavering, bloodthirsty beast. And he'd tear her into bloody ribbons of flesh before the serum ran its course. And then he'd become himself again. I wondered vaguely what would happen then. He'd probably go mad, realizing what he'd done. The mind can absorb only so much horror before it bursts the bonds of sanity and retreats into the security of insanity . . .

Leaving the machine on, I left the lab, locked the door, and went to my bedroom, ready for a soothing night's rest.

I was in bed, just about to turn off the bedside lamp when the door opened and Laura walked in.

My heart stopped beating, and my flesh turned to ice. I felt my head swim with baffled tangles of thought, and I had to force myself to breathe.

"Laura!" I gasped. "What —?"

I got a closer look at her face, then, as she approached the bed. Her eyes had a wild, terrified look, and a glistening patina of sweat coated her face, which bore a deathlike pallor.

"Edward . . ." she said, in a small, choked voice, her hands reaching out to me. "Edward, I've—I've come back to you!"

She was shivering, as one in the grip of some—*The machine!*

I leaped from the bed and ran to her, took her in my arms.

"Take off the ring!" I shouted. "You've got to take off the ring!"

"I—don't understand," she said, her face contorted with the pain of her fight against the relentless power of the machine.

There was no time to explain. I grabbed her by the hand and tried to slip the slim band from her finger, but her hand was clenched inflexibly into a fist and, even with the

strength of both my hands, I couldn't open it.

My mind was flooded with hideous projections of what might — of what *must* — be happening at that very moment.

Jason, a ravening beast, was even now seeking out the wearer of the ring. His apartment was scarcely a mile from my house. With the indefatigable energy of the beast he was, he'd be here at any moment.

"Why?" I shrieked at her. "*Why* did you come here?"

"Tonight . . ." she said, trembling as her will fought the urgings of the machine, "when you helped . . . when you were so kind . . . I—I began to hate myself for what I was . . . for what I'd let myself become . . . I broke off with Jason, Edward . . . It—It was so much harder than I thought it would be . . . something is pulling me, driving me back to him!"

My brain was reeling. I had to get to the machine, to turn it off. But I daren't leave her alone. If Jason came to the house . . .

"Hurry, darling!" I said, snatching up my keys from my dressing table and half-dragging Laura down the corridor to the door of the lab.

I heard lithe, nimble footsteps bounding up the staircase behind us.

Laura screamed.

My time had run out.

The gray-furred thing was crouched at the head of the stairs, glaring at us with glittering, red-flushed eyes. It came, with teeth bared and dripping saliva, down the hall toward us like a gray blur.

I jammed the keys into Laura's hands and shrieked, "The lab! Get inside the lab!"

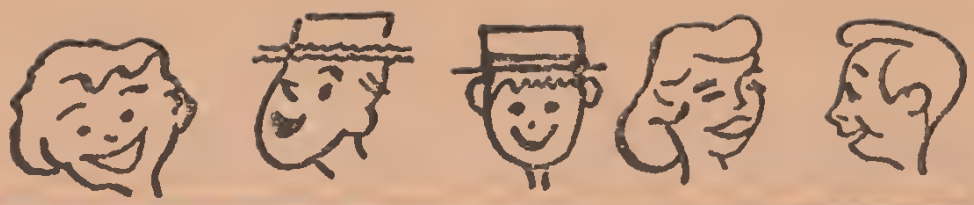
I sprang to meet the monster halfway. I felt the teeth clamping upon the flesh of my throat, an agonizing, painful pinching of the skin in a remorseless grip that tugged and drooled and tore until the flesh ripped away in its mouth.

I tried to cry out, but my words had become a gargle in my throat, a gargle that flecked the face of the monster with red spume.

And then I heard the door of the laboratory slam, even as I began to strangle on my own blood, and I knew that Laura was safe.

And somehow, I was happy, even as my vision dimmed and faded and my life gushed away in a sticky, warm pool that soaked the carpet beneath my head . . .

THE END



According to you...

Dear Editor:

We are only too glad to give a splendid new writer a boost. The two stories by Jack Sharkey were voted the very best you have published for a long time. The men said the tragic one was the better, the women thought the funny one his most interesting.

Mrs. Reinert Olsen
144 North Pine
Chicago 44, Ill.

• *Sort of reflects the respective positions of the sexes, doesn't it? Either way (or both) lots more Sharkey coming up. Hear that, you letter-writers down there?*

Dear Editor:

Those stories by Jack Sharkey are the best I ever read in *Fantastic*. My entire family enjoyed them. We hope to see more of his fascinating plots.

John Antunovich
3021 Wellington
Chicago 41, Ill.

Dear Editor:

Sure enjoyed both of Jack Sharkey's tales. Keep them coming.

Clem McDermott
Secretary City Council
Chicago 1, Ill.

Dear Editor:

I just read my first issue of *Fantastic* and found it pretty good. "The Trouble With Magic" was enjoyable. I agree with Mr. Solon 100 percent on werewolf and zombie and just plain

weird plots. I only hope that if you start on monsters you won't overload the magazine with vampires. Let's have more of good old Robert Bloch, please.

Jeff Patton
824 Austin Ave.
Park Ridge, Ill.

• *Well, we have one or two vampire stories in store for you, but they're neither of them really blood-greedy.*

Dear Editor:

I was delighted by "The Trouble With Magic" in the March issue, and wish to congratulate Randall Garrett on his "enchanting" story. I also wish to cast a vote for more of this type of story: a happy blend of whimsey, "off-white" magic and "nice" sex. This is fantasy that cheers rather than chills, delights rather than devastates.

And while we're talking of TTWM, a kudo for Virgil Finlay's illustration (they're nearly always good; and you've had him for some time, so keep him!) and for Edward Valigursky's colorful cover.

Editorially, you've got the idea: a great preponderance of fantasy, with an occasional god-out-of-the-space-machine story to sort of balance things. And go easy on the graveyard or Gothic horror stories. Magic is wonderful; dragons, basilisks, *et. al.* are fine too.

Please, no serials. And no novels, either, unless they're sheer masterpieces. Otherwise, you're doing fine, getting better, and promoting hope for much good reading in the future.

Jackson Blake
1109 W. 22½
Austin 5, Texas

• *That's what we've always said: Like us, like our basilisks.*

Dear Editor:

Enclosed is a verbal bouquet—my sincere thanks for a wonderful issue of *Fantastic.* I'm speaking of the March issue. The Valigursky cover was well done and did much to enhance the atmosphere of the "new" *Fantastic.* The over-all quality of the stories was very good. "East Is East" was an excellent mood piece. As to the new author, Jack Sharkey, keep him producing

both types of fiction—humorous and serious. He seems to be very versatile.

Bobby Gene Warner
745 Eldridge St.
Orlando, Fla.

Dear Editor:

I don't believe that I've ever read a more thoroughly interesting short story than Harlan Ellison's "The Abnormals." I enjoyed the front cover of the all-star issue so much.

James W. Ayers
609 First St.
Attalla, Ala.

• *Thanks to you both for kind and cheering words. Future* Fantastics, *we think, get better and better.*



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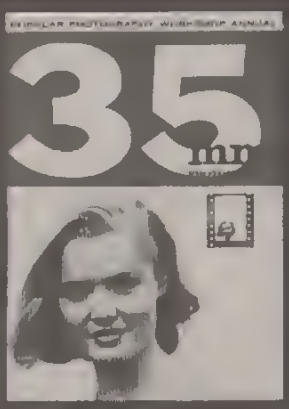
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